

THE
FAIRY GODMOTHER TALES
BOOK 3



THE SPINSTER AND THE FREE MAID

AMBERLEY
MARTIN

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O, fellow, come, the song we had last night.
Mark it, Cesario, it is old and plain; The spinsters and the knitters
in the sun And the free maids that weave their thread with bones
Do use to chant it: it is silly sooth, And dallies with the innocence
of love, Like the old age.

—Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, Act 2, Scene 4

CHAPTER ONE

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a young woman who rose above her station. She achieved this, as she did most things, by lying. She wasn't mean or vindictive and didn't lie out of spite, but she found lies easier than the truth in most situations, and lying soon became a habit.

Cassia wasn't born a liar; she had dishonesty thrust upon her by a rather unfortunate circumstance.

Whenever anyone asked her, she would say that she'd had a happy childhood, and though her family was poor, they had everything they needed: each other.

This was untrue on many levels.

Cassia was the daughter of woodcutters. Their house was little more than a shack with a thatched roof constantly in need of repair, their diet consisted mainly of potatoes, and their clothes were bedraggled cast-offs. Her father spent all day cutting trees and all night battling the bureaucracy of permits and milling fees. Her mother spent her days desperately tending the garden and her nights debating whether it was better to eat one of their chickens or hope for a few more eggs.

Every morning, except on Sundays, Cassia and her sister Avalon would walk the two miles to the local school. The girls were twins and as alike as two people could be. Their mother's eyes often narrowed with thought before she called them by name. And half the time, she got the wrong one.

They both had dark brown eyes, prominent cheekbones, wan complexions, and wavy brown hair that looked as if they'd been rolling around in the ashes from the fire—both in the mixture of colors, and the number of tangles. The only time they'd ever spent apart was the three minutes between when Avalon escaped their mother's womb and when Cassia followed.

Each day, in the small school house, Cassia would put as much effort into learning her letters and numbers as her deprived body and spirit could manage before walking the two miles home again to an evening's worth of chores.

The walk, though long, was Cassia's favorite part of the day. The winding path cut through the middle of a forest, so it didn't take long for the tree trunks to hide everything else from view. The fingers of foliage above made intricate patterns against the sky, and the gnarled toes that dug into the ground offered hiding places to small, snuffly woodland creatures. The air was always moist and cool and filled with birdsong, and the undergrowth provided plenty of weapons with which one could act out mock battles.

For a time, Cassia could escape the worry that wafted around her parents like body odor. She could collect oddly shaped pine cones and beautifully colored leaves. She could play hide and seek with her sister between the trunks. She could sing silly songs, laugh at Avalon's groan-worthy jokes, and dream of a future far different to the present without getting disapproving looks from her parents.

But on the way home from school on one particular day, when the girls were ten summers old, Cassia wandered too far from the path in search of the perfect hiding spot. The trunks all looked the same, she couldn't tell forward from backward, and with panic making her heart thrash in her chest, she blundered headlong through the undergrowth, calling Avalon's name.

By the time she came to her senses and stopped running, she was well and truly lost.

Over the rush of her pulse in her ears, she heard the scurrying feet of small animals, the groan of trees bending in the wind, and the screech of birds fighting over the crunchiest bugs.

"There you are," Avalon said as she pushed her way between two ferns.

Cassia's heart leapt, and she clutched her sister's hand. They stared at each other, and neither said what they both knew: they were lost deep in the wood. But at least they were together.

Any hope Cassia had that her blundering had left a clear path back to the road shriveled as quickly as a tomato plant in a dry summer, but they

resolutely put one foot in front of the other, fighting through the foliage or going around when the undergrowth became too dense.

As the glimpses of sky began to darken, thickening the gloom around them, the girls came upon a small cottage in the middle of a clearing.

Cassia stopped and stared. It was the most curious thing.

The cottage didn't appear to be made of wood or mud or brick, but gingerbread. Frosting edged the roof, giant sweets trimmed the sugar-glass windows, licorice sticks provided the framework, and a fence constructed of candy canes lined the front yard.

Cassia had tasted gingerbread only once, at their school fair the year before, when she and Avalon had won the three-legged race, and two artfully decorated gingerbread people had been their prize. The cookie man had been almost too wonderful to eat. Almost. Cassia had picked off his gumdrop buttons, plucked out his licorice eyes, and licked off his iced cuffs and collar before finally biting into the spicy dough of his head.

She had no such hesitation now.

She pulled Avalon through the creaky gate in the candy cane fence, broke off a chunk of the gingerbread windowsill, and handed half to her sister before taking a tremendous bite.

At that exact moment, the door opened and an old woman stepped out.

At this point in her life, Cassia had not yet learned to lie, and in any case, she couldn't deny what they'd done, not with their mouths and hands full of stolen gingerbread. She froze as the old woman regarded them. Her hair was white and so thin that it couldn't conceal the age spots on her scalp. Her face was craggy with wrinkles, her back bent by the weight of years, and her eyes rheumy and unfocused.

"Greta? Hannah?" she asked, her voice crackly like leaves in autumn. "Forgive your silly old grandmother, but I wasn't expecting you until tomorrow. Come inside and have some supper."

The girls exchanged a look, but by unspoken agreement decided it was easier to let the old woman believe they were indeed her granddaughters. Especially if there was food on offer, and shelter from the encroaching darkness.

They discreetly dropped their handfuls of gingerbread and followed the woman inside. A fire crackled in a large oven, warming the room. Oil lamps

cast a golden glow over a couch that looked worn in all the right places. And the pantry stood open, full of food.

The old woman led Cassia and Avalon to a small dining table where they each took a seat in one of the mismatched, colorful chairs. Considering she hadn't been expecting guests, it was no time at all before the kindly grandmother laid out a sumptuous three-course meal.

Cassia had never been served two courses, let alone three, and by the time she'd eaten her way through thick, rich, beef broth; a whole roast quail with silky mashed potatoes, tender green beans, and plump peas; and light fluffy dumplings drowned in a golden syrup, she'd forgotten she was technically still lost in the forest.

As the old woman brewed a pot of tea to "finish off the meal", Cassia cuddled up with Avalon on the soft couch and fell into a satiated slumber.

By the time she awoke the next morning, a chain was around her ankle, and she was a prisoner.

There was a moment of confusion, where she stared at the long, thin chain that snaked across the floor, up to the old woman's hand, and back down to Avalon's ankle. It was such a bright, shiny silver, that if it had been a piece of jewelry, Cassia would've worn it proudly. As it was, she had no interest in it, but try as she might, she could neither break it nor slip her foot from the loop. There was no knot to undo, no lock to pick, and not even any links to loosen.

She nudged Avalon awake and watched the same gamut of emotions cross her sister's face. They had no more luck releasing Avalon's foot, and it appeared that the only way to get free would be to snatch the chain from the old woman's grip.

Cassia studied their captor.

She stood in the kitchen with her back to them, whistling tunelessly as she prepared breakfast. No, as breakfast prepared *itself*.

Avalon made a series of hand movements that Cassia interpreted to mean they should rush the old woman, hit her over the head, grab the chain, and flee. Cassia nodded her agreement. They stood in unison and charged. The chain whispered against the wafer floorboards. The old woman spun around with surprising dexterity, held out her hand, and an invisible force locked both girls in place.

The old woman—her gaze cold and calculating and no longer rheumy—smirked at them. “Where are you going in such a rush?”

“Let us go,” Avalon said, as Cassia’s lips opened to demand the same thing.

“Why would I do that?” the old woman asked. “You’re the ones who stumbled upon my house, who nibbled on my windowsill, who accepted my invitation to come inside. Why would I return the power you so willingly relinquished?”

“Who are you?” Cassia asked, feeling rather brave.

The woman played absently with the loop of chain in her hand. “I have many names, and most people call me Helene, but you may call me Godmother.”

“You’re a witch,” Cassia said.

“Indeed.”

“What do you want with us?” Avalon demanded.

Helene stepped forward and caught Avalon’s chin in her hand. Though it was not *her* chin, Cassia could feel the witch’s fingertips digging into her skin.

“First, child, I’m going to fatten you up, and then I’m going to eat you.”

Cassia shivered, as if a dozen spiders were crawling down her spine. She pounced forward, knocked Helene’s hand away from Avalon’s chin, and yanked the chain free from the witch’s other hand.

“Run Ava!” she cried, as she assailed the witch with her fists.

Avalon ran, but not toward the door. Instead, she headed for the kitchen and started pelting Helene with anything she could get her hands on: cutlery and cups, potatoes and onions, handfuls of sudsy water.

Helene caught Cassia’s wrists and gripped them so tightly that Cassia cried out in pain. “You have spirit,” the witch said. “I might eat you first.”

“Leave her alone!” Avalon ran toward them, a carving knife in her hand. Before she could strike, the witch whipped around, released one of Cassia’s wrists so she could catch Avalon’s, and squeezed until the young girl cried out in pain and dropped the knife.

Helene gave both girls a vicious shake and threw them to the floor. Then she made a *come hither* gesture, and the middle of their chain flew back to her hand.

“Let’s get one thing clear,” the witch said. “There are only two ways to get free of your chain: if I release you or if I die. And I’ve been alive for a very, very long time.” She stood up straighter, crossed her arms, and tapped her toe impatiently. “Now, shall we discuss the terms of your imprisonment?”

HELENE DIDN’T EAT THEM immediately.

She warned them that she would, eventually. When they were plump enough. And then she served them each a heaped plate of eggs and sausages, toast and tomatoes, and beans baked in a rich sauce.

Cassia attempted to resist. If she refused to eat, she would never grow fat enough for the witch to eat. But the scent of the meal was intoxicating. And it had arrived in a quantity that Cassia had only ever dreamed of.

Her mouth began to water.

She glanced up at her sister, seeing her own desire reflected in Avalon’s eyes.

“No point starving to death, is there?” Avalon asked.

Cassia replied in a whisper. “We need to be strong if we want to escape.”

Avalon nodded. Cassia nodded back. They both dug in.

Cassia moaned with pleasure as the spicy bean sauce danced across her tongue.

After they’d licked their plates clean, the witch showed them the loft where they were to sleep. The only access was up a tall ladder, which would be removed each night while they slept. The ceiling was low, and there were no windows to offer escape, but the bed was large and soft, and a small chest contained clothes to replace their threadbare rags.

Avalon held up a pair of soft calfskin leggings. “How are we meant to put these on with a chain around our ankles?”

Helene’s voice floated up from below. “One leg at a time, you foolish child.”

Avalon shrugged, swapped her shift dress for a tunic, and slid first her free leg and then her bound one into the leggings. Surprisingly—or not so surprisingly—the chain slid through the fabric as if it were water, leaving no trace of its passage.

Cassia chose a cream blouse, a bright blue pinafore, and a pair of long undershorts that her mother had always called “witch’s britches.” The fabric was soft and warm, and she had no more trouble with the chain than Avalon had.

Once the girls were dressed in their new clothes, they tested the limits of their imprisonment as they performed a few household chores. The kitchen itself took care of the dishes, while Avalon swept crumbs from the wafer flooring and Cassia wiped down the dining table.

The chain was clearly magical, as it stretched and shrank as needed. It grew long enough to allow them to retrieve sweets from the garden while the witch—still holding the middle—remained inside, but it didn’t pool around their feet or trip them up when they were all within arm’s reach of each other.

The witch didn’t need to constantly hold the chain, either, as it remained locked in place where she left it, as if it were tied to an invisible hitching post, and it always jumped to her hand when she beckoned.

By the end of that day, the girls had tried a dozen ways to either free themselves from the chain or free the chain from the witch. They failed every time, and as they fell into bed that night, they begrudgingly accepted that they were, in fact, trapped.

Helene didn’t eat them the next day. Or the day after that.

After a few weeks of eating the most sumptuous meals, Avalon’s cheekbones weren’t as prominent, her skin wasn’t as wan, and her clothes no longer hung off her frame. And Cassia knew, without need of a mirror, that the changes in her own body were just as dramatic.

In between meals, they dusted, and swept, and washed their clothes. They tended the garden. And they chased away a menagerie of woodland creatures who liked to sneak into the house and nibble on the skirting boards.

They could have refused to work, of course, but having nothing to do except wonder when they would be eaten was worse than keeping busy.

Helene spent her days spinning. She had a variety of spindles made of different woods—warm oak, cool ash, deep walnut—but it was a beautiful, dark rosewood spindle that drew Cassia’s gaze. The long, thin shaft was etched with faint carvings, but the round whorl near the bottom was smooth. Cassia forgot her sweeping and stood hypnotized as she watched

the witch spin and spin, turning the raw fiber into a long thread that wound around the shaft.

She snapped out of her trance when the witch barked, “Come here, child.”

Cassia set her broom aside and crossed the room to sit on the small stool beside the witch.

As she removed the yarn from the shaft, Helene gestured to the collection of spindles nestled in a purpose-made box. “Which one would you choose, if you could?”

Cassia let her gaze drift across the spindles, as if considering each one in turn, before pointing hesitantly to the one in the witch’s hands. Helene made a satisfied sound and wrapped the end of a new batch of fiber around the shaft, looping it through a small hook in the end.

“Draw out the fiber,” she said, demonstrating. “Roll the whorl against your leg to set it spinning, then carefully guide the twist up the fiber.”

She scrutinized Cassia, and Cassia nodded to show she understood. That was all the instruction she would receive. The witch hesitated a moment longer before handing the spindle over.

Cassia took it reverently, as if it were made of gold. It felt warm in her hands. Solid. *Right*. She traced her fingertip over the carvings on the shaft. She could see now that they were words, but not of any language she understood. The witch draped the loose fiber over Cassia’s arm, and the girl pinched the thread between her finger and thumb. The fiber wasn’t sheep’s wool, as Cassia had assumed. It wasn’t goat, either. It had a silvery tint and, though light as a cloud, felt rough against her skin.

“What animal is this from?” she asked, her curiosity winning out over her fear of the witch.

“It’s unicorn fleece,” the witch said casually.

Cassia’s head snapped up.

The witch was watching her, a challenging look in her eyes, daring Cassia to call her a liar. Cassia did not dare.

“It’s very rare and very hard to come by, so don’t waste it.”

Cassia swallowed hard, laid the spindle against her thigh, and began. The way the fiber twisted into yarn felt like magic. She spun and slid, spun and slid, falling into a rhythm and not noticing the ache that built in her shoulders or the cramp in her fingers, until she ran out of fiber.

The witch let out a small snort. “Who would’ve thought that *you* would be a natural?” She reclaimed the spindle and unwound the thread.

Cassia could see that it was uneven in places, but the silvery yarn shimmered, and she was proud of her first effort.

The witch showed her how to turn her single ply into two, making sure to spin in the opposite direction so as not to untwist what she’d already done. Once she’d finished, she had a small piece of thread that looked similar to the silver chain around her ankle.

The witch studied it closely, rubbed it between her fingertips, held it up to catch the light, and flicked her tongue out to taste it. Eventually, she snorted in disgust and tossed the strand aside.

“What’s wrong?” Cassia asked, her voice small.

The witch shook her head. “You may be a natural, but some things come too easy,” was all she said. She gazed into the middle distance, as if lost in thought, and when her focus returned, she stared at Cassia as if only just noticing her. “Why are you sitting around? Get back to work.”

A combination of shame, anger, and fear flared in Cassia’s cheeks. She stood up so fast that she knocked her stool over, then stormed back to where she’d left the broom, and started sweeping so vigorously that if she’d stayed in one spot, she likely would have worn a hole in the wafer flooring.

The heat of her emotions had started to cool by the time she’d swept her way across to where the silver thread lay abandoned. She swept it up with everything else but didn’t discard it into the trash. It was the prettiest thing she’d ever held in her hand, and if the witch didn’t want it, she may as well keep it.

She measured it around her wrist, and it was the perfect size for a bracelet. The two ends snapped into place against each other, leaving only a tiny line where they had joined, like a graft in an apple tree.

For the first time since the girls had arrived at the witch’s house, Cassia smiled. Then she sent a furtive glance over her shoulder, to make sure that neither the witch nor Avalon had noticed what she’d done, before pulling down the cuff of her sleeve to hide her prize.

The next day, it was Avalon’s turn to be summoned to sit beside the witch, to choose a spindle from the box, to try her hand at spinning the unicorn fiber into thread.

Cassia watched from across the room, where the witch had set her the task of cleaning chicken bones to use as bobbins. At least, Cassia *hoped* they were chicken bones.

Avalon chose the walnut spindle and was soon lost in the repetitive motion of drawing the fiber, turning the spindle, and teasing out the twist. When the fiber was all used and the thread turned to two ply, the witch again inspected it.

Cassia held her breath and clenched her fist until the bone she was cleaning snapped.

The witch gave Avalon an appraising look. “Yes,” she said. “You’ll do.”

That night, before the witch sent the girls up to their loft, she pinched Avalon’s cheek as if checking her for plumpness, and said, “Good work today. Sleep well. I’ll most likely eat you in the morning.”

She hummed merrily as the girls climbed the ladder, and Cassia had to fight down the bile rising in her throat. As they lay together in their bed, Cassia placed her lips next to Avalon’s ear and murmured, “We have to escape before she eats you.”

“How?” Avalon whispered back.

Cassia hadn’t figured that out yet. With the magical chain around their ankles, they had no hope of escaping. Not while the witch still lived. Which meant the answer was obvious.

“We kill the witch.”

THE NEXT MORNING, THE witch clattered around in the kitchen while the girls waited for her to raise the ladder. Cassia wanted to dress in a pair of sturdy boots and a warm coat, in anticipation of their escape and journey home, but she was afraid that anything out of the ordinary might alert the witch to their plan, so she chose the same outfit she usually wore.

As she was pulling on her blouse, Avalon caught her wrist. “What’s this?” she demanded in a fierce whisper, her thumb brushing the silver bracelet.

“Nothing,” Cassia said, telling herself the prevarication wasn’t really a lie.

“Why would you wear it?”

Cassia shrugged. "It's silver. It's valuable. We can sell it when we get home."

This lie felt like an itch she couldn't reach. She had no intention of ever taking the bracelet off, let alone selling it.

"It's tainted." Avalon's brow furrowed. "Can't you feel it?"

Cassia inhaled sharply. They hadn't spoken a word about the spinning, about how Avalon had earned the witch's approval while Cassia hadn't.

"It might not be as perfect as yours," she said, the words bitter on her tongue, "but it's *mine*. I made it. I'm keeping it."

Avalon pulled back, her eyes brimming with hurt. "Cass ..."

Cassia forced herself to smile. "We can talk about it later. For now, do you remember the plan?"

Avalon chewed on her lip but nodded.

When they made it down to the kitchen, a shiver ran through Cassia.

The kitchen usually produced meals of its own accord, but today it was still. No bubbling pots on the stove. No knives chopping. No spoons stirring.

Only the oven had any life, and it was stoked higher than usual, the heat stifling.

"Come here, child," the witch said, gesturing to Avalon. "Roll out this dough as thin as your fingernail then fold it and roll it again. We're having a pie tonight, and I want the pastry just right."

Avalon squeezed Cassia's hand before crossing the room to do as the witch commanded.

"You." The witch pointed her skeletal finger at Cassia. "Put more wood in the oven. I want it roaring like a bonfire at midsummer."

Cassia hurried to do her bidding. Sweat beaded on her brow as she crouched beside the oven. She pulled on the heavy door. She tugged. She yanked. But the door wouldn't budge.

"What's taking so long?" the witch demanded.

"I can't open it," Cassia said.

"Have you tried turning the handle?" the witch snapped.

"Yes, it's stuck."

The witch huffed out a breath and shuffled across the room.

Cassia eased out of the way and picked up a log from the stack beside the oven, ready to toss it inside.

The witch had to release her grip on the chain to grasp the handle with both hands. With a heave, the door swung open, the flames licking the entrance as if attempting to escape.

Cassia flinched back from the intense heat.

“See, you foolish girl,” the witch growled, “there was nothing wrong with it.”

Cassia looked from the roaring fire, to the witch, to the log in her hand. Without hesitation, without consideration for the consequences of what she was about to do, she cracked the witch over the head.

Helene cried out in alarm and pain, but before she could strike back with either her fist or her magic, Cassia hit her again.

She hit so hard that she lost her grip on the log.

Blood poured down the witch’s forehead and into her eyes, blinding her. She stumbled, kicked the fallen log, tripped, and tumbled headfirst through the open oven door.

Cassia lurched back in horror before gathering her wits and rushing forward again to slam the door shut. The latch fell into place, but the oven couldn’t contain the sound of the witch’s screams.

Avalon appeared beside Cassia and grabbed her arm, her eyes wide. “You pushed her in!”

“I didn’t,” Cassia cried. “She tripped.”

That wasn’t a lie. It *wasn’t*. She hadn’t pushed the witch, had she?

But she *had* hit her over the head. She *had* closed the door. She *had* trapped her inside. She *had* doomed her to a horrible death.

But she had also saved her sister—and herself—from a horrible fate.

The girls huddled together and covered their ears until the screams finally died, along with the witch. The chain dropped to floor, ringing out too loud against the wafers.

Cassia let out a sob of relief.

Avalon’s face was ashen.

“Come on,” Cassia said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Let’s go.”

The chain, now inert, slipped easily from their ankles as if it were nothing more than a loose garter.

As they headed for the exit, the creak of the oven door’s handle stopped them in their tracks.

“Don’t look,” Avalon said. “Keep walking.”

Cassia took another step.

The oven door groaned open.

Avalon rushed for the exit. But Cassia glanced over her shoulder.

A blackened figure crawled out of the oven as the stench of burnt flesh assaulted her nostrils. The figure rose to its feet. The charcoaled crust started to crack and fall away, revealing skin as fresh and pale as a baby's.

"Cass, come on!" Avalon called.

Cassia spun around. Her sister had the door open. Sweet freedom beckoned, only a few steps away. She ran for it.

The witch's voice came as if from beyond the grave. "No, stay."

The door slammed shut and Cassia crashed into it. As Avalon fought to open it again, Cassia turned back to face the witch. Half her charred skin had flaked off, revealing her furious visage and lustrous dark hair.

"You thought you could kill me?" The witch thrust one hand in their direction, and the chain shot toward them like a striking snake. Cassia shoved Avalon to the side then threw herself in the opposite direction. "Didn't I warn you I've been alive for a very long time?"

Cassia scrambled behind the couch and pressed her fingers to her temples in an effort to think. If the witch wouldn't stay dead, their only hope was to escape before the chain caught them again. But how could they do that with the door magicked shut?

A guinea pig scurried past her, and Cassia let out a surprised yelp, though the poor creature was certainly less terrifying than the witch. But what the guinea pig had in its mouth gave Cassia an idea.

She poked her head up from behind the couch long enough to see that Avalon was fighting both ends of the chain, like a knight battling a two-headed dragon, with a carving knife in one hand and a pot lid in the other. Whenever the chain struck at her, she would block it with her shield or slash it with her sword, though it never seemed to take any damage.

Cassia turned and dug her fingertips into the gingerbread wall. It had withstood rain and sun and wind, but was as soft as if it had been freshly baked. She wrenched fistfuls free and tossed them aside, digging deeper until she'd pierced through to the outside. But even as she fought to make the hole big enough to climb through, the wall began to regrow.

She let out a shriek of frustration, ripping at the wall, and in desperation, tearing at the edge with her teeth. The spicy gingerbread burned her tongue

and tickled her nose, but everywhere her lips touched, the regrowth stalled.

Cassia bit off huge mouthfuls. She chewed and swallowed until her stomach ached, until the hole was finally big enough. She pushed to her feet, one hand pressed against her protesting stomach, the other wiping crumbs off her lips, and called Avalon's name.

The witch had backed Avalon into the far corner of the cottage. She had abandoned the pot lid and swung the knife wildly at the ends of the chain.

No. *End*. Only one end was attacking Avalon.

Cassia glanced around, searching for the other end. She followed the chain with her eyes, tracing it along the floor, and found it wrapped around Avalon's ankle once again. Cassia met her sister's gaze.

"Go!" Avalon called. "Run!"

"I won't leave you!" Cassia cried.

The chain stopped attacking Avalon as the witch turned around, as if she'd suddenly remembered there were two girls, not one. With a flick of her hand, she sent the chain snaking across the room.

Avalon dropped the knife, sprang forward, and caught the chain in both hands. It bucked and slithered through her fingers, but she looped it around her wrist then spun in a circle, wrapping the chain around her body until she was tangled up in it.

"Go," Avalon repeated. She lost her balance and dropped to the floor. "Before it's too late."

The witch took a deep breath and reached out her hand as if she were about to cast a spell. Cassia didn't wait to see what the spell would do. She dropped to her knees, crawled through the hole, and with tears blurring her vision, ran out the gate and into the wood, leaving her sister behind.

A PATH LED AWAY from the gingerbread house, and Cassia ran headlong down it, not knowing why they hadn't seen it before or if she was even going in the right direction, until it deposited her behind the school house in the hamlet. From there, it was a simple matter of following the road home.

Cassia had never made the journey so quickly.

Her mother was in the yard, tending their goat, when Cassia ran up to her. Her eyes narrowed as she took in Cassia's new clothes and well-fed appearance.

“Which one are you?” she asked, with no small amount of irritation.

It wasn’t the response Cassia had been expecting. She’d thought her mother would run toward her, wrap her in a hug, cry happy tears, and ask after Avalon.

Unsure how to respond, she eventually said, “It’s me, Mama, Cassia.”

“Oh, all right,” her mother replied in a disappointed sort of way.

Cassia’s chest started to ache. “We need to save Avalon,” she said, before launching into the tale of everything that had happened after they’d veered off the path on their way home from school so many weeks earlier.

After she’d finished, her mother regarded her for a moment then said, “There’s no such thing as witches. And houses can’t be made from gingerbread. Now, go on inside, change out of those fancy clothes, and start on your chores.”

Cassia didn’t understand. Maybe the witch had tainted her somehow. Maybe some sort of spell was making her mother react this way.

She went inside as instructed but didn’t change out of her fancy clothes. Her old ones wouldn’t fit her now, anyway.

When her father came home that evening, she flew into his arms and repeated her tale.

He hugged her tightly then leaned back enough to give her a kind look. “You don’t need to tell stories, Cass. Those woods are tricky. Lots of people get lost.”

“I know where Avalon is,” Cassia insisted, her grip tightening on the back of her father’s shirt. “We need to save her.”

Her father glanced at the window. “It’s too late now. We’ll go in the morning.”

Her mother, who was in the kitchen, made an unhappy, “Hmmm,” then told Cassia to set the table for supper.

Cassia was ready to go at first light. Her father humored her as she dragged him at a steady pace to the school house then down the path that led toward the gingerbread house.

She couldn’t remember how far away the cottage was—she’d been running in too much of a panic—but the path seemed to continue for a very long time before it deposited them back in the hamlet, as if they’d somehow gotten turned around without noticing.

Cassia set her jaw and set off down the path again. This time, she walked slowly, searching for forks in the road or bushes that might conceal a different way, but she found no sign of the gingerbread house before they found themselves back in the hamlet.

Before she could take the path a third time, her father caught her arm. He crouched down in front of her, his eyes tender.

"I'm sorry, Cass," he said, "but Ava's gone."

"No," she said.

"Whatever happened out there wasn't your fault."

"We need to find her before it's too late."

"It already is." He cupped her jaw. "The woods are dark and dangerous, and sometimes bad things happen to little girls who stray from the path. Just be glad you're the one who came back to us."

Cassia's throat burned with unspoken words, and her eyes brimmed with unshed tears. She reached for the bracelet on her wrist and ran the uneven silver thread between her finger and thumb.

She wasn't lying about the witch, but if her parents wanted to believe that Avalon got lost in the forest and died of starvation, or a fall, or an animal attack, well, that was probably an easier fate for a parent to contemplate than their daughter being eaten by a witch.

"We got lost in the wood," Cassia said, "and we were so hungry that Avalon ate some wild berries, but they made her sick and she wouldn't wake up."

It was a ridiculous lie. Her weight clearly showed that she had eaten better during her imprisonment than she ever had at home. But it was what her father wanted to hear, so he believed it. He leaned forward to kiss her forehead, and they walked home together hand in hand.

When they got back to their shack, her mother presented her with a basic shift dress and demanded Cassia change clothes, saying she would sell her fancy ones for a good price to one of the families in the hamlet.

Cassia did as she was told.

As soon as her mother's gaze fell on the bracelet, she wanted to sell that too, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't slip it off Cassia's hand, the two ends would not part, and not even her father's sharpest axe could cut through it.

So she got to keep it.

And every time Cassia touched the silver thread, it reassured her that there really had been a witch in a gingerbread house who had almost certainly eaten her sister. And it reminded her that it was easier to tell people a lie they wanted to hear than a truth that they didn't.

And that philosophy served her well for the next ten years.

CHAPTER TWO

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a woman who chose to make a solemn vow. She did this, as she did most things, out of a sense of duty. She wasn't a martyr and didn't act this way for the glory, but she found a set of rules more reliable than a fickle human heart, and sticking to her convictions soon became a habit.

Lenore lived in a small but cozy farm house on a small but sufficient farmlet with a herd of creatures that looked a lot like llamas, unless you looked at them the right way and had been touched with enough magic to recognize them for what they really were: unicorns.

The United Duchies of Fairmont was dotted with small settlements carved out of the forest that covered the realm. Lenore's farmlet was no different. She had two paddocks around the house, but the unicorns were free to roam the surrounding forest and hunt the woodland creatures.

Lenore stood in the small barn behind her house, wearing a rough cotton shirt and sturdy woolen trousers, a scarf tied over her close-cropped hair, and a pair of clippers in her hand. The barn provided both shelter for the unicorns if they desired it—one side was open so they could come and go as they pleased—and a place to work.

Today was shearing day, a job which had been troublesome when Lenore was sixteen summers old and newly introduced to the herd, and was no less troublesome now she had spent sixteen summers with them. The only difference was that she had long ago stopped being surprised by the unicorns' antics and had found a certain peace in accepting that things would never go smoothly.

"All right," she said to Honey, the unicorn who was standing in front of her, chewing on something that crunched in a most disconcerting manner. "I

don't like you and you don't like me, but let's get this done with as little fuss as possible."

Lenore stepped forward. Honey stayed suspiciously still.

Lenore raised the clippers. Honey didn't twitch.

Lenore placed the blades against the animal's hide. A knock sounded on the side of the barn, and Honey skittered out of reach.

No one came to visit Lenore unless they were selling something or looking to buy. She had no patience for either type.

"What?" she snapped, planting her hands on her hips.

A young woman stood in the opening, her hands clasped behind her back. She was wearing a fine woolen vest and trousers in warm gray over a cream blouse with a stiff collar and a perfectly coiffed cravat. Her hair was pulled back from her face and was, as far as Lenore could tell with the light behind the woman, a mixture of brown shades that complemented her fair complexion.

The woman took half a step forward. "Good morning, madam. I've come from His Grace, the Duke of—"

"No," Lenore said.

The woman's brows dipped. "I beg your—"

"I'm not interested. I don't want to sell my land or my animals. I don't want to donate a prize to be auctioned at some charity ball. I have no intention of attending any dinner parties, weddings, or naming ceremonies. And if you've come to raise the taxes or demand I purchase a new permit for something I've been doing peacefully for sixteen years, well, you can go back to your duke and tell him I have a few choice suggestions about where he can put his permits."

The young woman opened her mouth, closed it again, nodded her head, and took her leave.

Lenore turned back to Honey. "Let's get this over with."

An hour later, Lenore was in the barn facing off with Pudding. Pudding was young for a unicorn, not as tall or solid as some of the others, but certainly more skittish. Lenore was murmuring nonsense to her in a soothing tone as she clipped her fleece.

A knock came on the side of the barn. Lenore froze. Pudding's ears twitched.

The duke's servant once again stood in the opening, bearing a scroll of parchment in her loosely clasped hands.

"No," Lenore said, in as fierce a whisper as she could manage.

"But madam," the servant began, "His Grace only wants to—"

Pudding bolted across the stall and jumped the fence in a way that probably would have surprised someone who was unfamiliar with either unicorns or llamas.

Lenore gave the duke's servant a flat look. The young woman tugged at her collar and slunk out of view.

An hour after *that*, Lenore was trying to coax Custard into the stall when Sugar wandered in from the paddock. Sugar was a big old girl and stubborn as a river. Once she was in motion, no amount of obstacles would stop her until she either reached her destination or ran out of motivation. If an object was bigger than her, she would flow around it, but if it was smaller, she'd sweep over it like a tidal bore.

Lenore darted forward to save a bucket from being crushed under Sugar's foot as the now familiar knock sounded on the side of the barn.

Lenore spared a glance to confirm it was the same servant back again before hustling to push a wheelbarrow out of Sugar's path. "Not now," she grunted.

"But madam, I really must—"

"Not," Lenore ground out, "now." Her gaze snagged on Custard, who was strategically balanced on three legs while scratching her ear with the fourth. She was directly in Sugar's path.

Mostly, the unicorns got along with each other, but there was a definite hierarchy in the herd. If Sugar was set on getting to the stall and Custard put herself in the way—intentionally or not—Sugar would take it as a challenge.

Lenore didn't need a unicorn battle right now. Not at shearing time. Unicorn blood was almost impossible to clean out of their fleece.

"Custard!" Lenore cried. She gave the wheelbarrow a shove to make sure it was well and truly out of the way then clapped her hands together furiously. "Go, go, go!"

Already Sugar's fleece was starting to shimmer. Next, the stubby horn on her forehead, which was normally hidden by her woolly fringe, would sprout to its full length and the fight would be on.

Lenore scrambled across the barn to where the bridles were hanging. The unicorns only wore them when they were hitched to Lenore's small wagon, but if she could get one on Custard, she could pull her out of Sugar's way.

She snatched a bridle from its hook, spun around, and stopped dead.

The duke's fool servant had placed herself between the animals, her arms raised in an effort to either make herself appear larger or attract Sugar's attention. She'd certainly succeeded on the second count. Sugar's gaze zeroed in on her.

When unicorns fought each other, they rarely died. It was always about establishing rank rather than causing permanent injury or death, and any wounds they caused each other healed quickly enough.

Humans were another matter entirely.

Unicorns tolerated people for the most part—were even occasionally fond of them—but when they were provoked, they struck quickly and aimed to kill.

Lenore didn't even know which duke she'd have to report the young woman's death to.

"Hey, hey, hey," the young woman said, waving her hands above her head.

As far as openers went, it was neither the gentle coaxing nor the groveling respect that unicorns responded to.

Lenore ran forward. Maybe she could get the bridle on Sugar before it was too late.

Sugar's head turned left and right as she followed the movement of the servant's hand. Then her head snapped forward, and her tongue flicked out. By the time Lenore reached them, the young woman had led Sugar around Custard and into the stall, where the unicorn stood placidly, gumming a bracelet on the woman's wrist.

The woman didn't have any puncture marks, and Sugar's glow had faded. Lenore considered that a win.

The servant stroked Sugar's neck, murmured something soothing, carefully extricated her bracelet from the unicorn's mouth, and slowly backed out of the stall. Lenore shut and latched the gate before chasing Custard into the opposite stall and turning to the young woman.

"Well," she said. "I suppose after that, the least I can do is offer you a cup of tea."

The servant gave her a faint smile. “And five minutes of your time.”

Lenore resigned herself to hearing the duke’s request and led the servant to the house.

LENORE SKIPPED CEREMONY AND led the young woman through the back door of her cottage and directly into the kitchen. It had a farmhouse sink, a cast iron stove, and a small table and chairs which sat next to a window that let in enough light to make the room bright and airy.

“Have a seat, if you like,” Lenore said.

“I’ll stand.”

Lenore filled the kettle and set it on the stove. “I suppose this is a bit humble compared to a duke’s house.”

“I grew up in a house much smaller and less charming than this.” The servant stood in the center of the room with her hands held aloft in front of her.

Lenore gestured to the sink. “There’s soap and water if you’d like to wash.”

“Thank you.” The young woman stepped forward, rolled up her sleeves, and ladled water from a bucket beside the sink in order to wash the unicorn slobber off her hands.

Lenore’s gaze snagged on the bracelet that had so fascinated Sugar. It was a thin silver chain, formed of two threads wound together, and without any visible clasp. She stifled a gasp of recognition. How had this young woman come to be in possession of a bracelet spun from unicorn fleece?

“You never told me your name,” Lenore said, suddenly in less of a rush to shoo her visitor away.

“Oh.” The servant shook the water from her hands, glanced around for a towel, and gratefully took the one Lenore offered. “It’s Cassia. I’ve come from His Grace, the Duke of Langbern and Dux of Fairmont, Lord Beaumont. He bid me ask you—”

“Look,” Lenore said, holding up her hand to stop Cassia’s spiel. “I know I agreed to give you five minutes, and I’ll hold myself to that, hopefully over a cup of tea so I’ll have something to help me swallow the duke’s words easily, but I have to warn you, you’ll leave here disappointed. I have received many solicitations over the years from people wanting to buy my

land or animals, or sell me a share of a bridge or a stake in cooperative that brews herbal remedies. I have no interest in whatever the duke is either offering or asking.”

“Good,” Cassia said, handing back the towel.

“Good?” Lenore echoed.

“Madam, I won’t leave disappointed as I’m merely a servant here on behalf of His Grace, and your response to his proposal bothers me not. But I can assure you, your five minutes won’t be wasted as the duke doesn’t want to buy or sell anything. How’s that tea coming?”

Lenore blinked.

Cassia was maybe all of twenty summers old. It had been a while since Lenore had conversed with anyone that young, and she’d forgotten how full of self confidence they could be.

“Enough of that ‘madam’ nonsense,” she said. “You may call me Lenore.” She tried not to let it show as she bustled around the kitchen, but Cassia’s words had left her intrigued.

Fairmont sat on the southwest coast of the Seven Realms. It wasn’t the largest or the richest realm, but it did at least maintain good relations with its neighbors to the east and north. It also had the benefit of being ruled by a triumvirate of dukes. Each duke or duchess had their own historical duchy, but the law of the land applied across all of them equally, and if one ruler drifted toward megalomania, the other two reined the first in.

Lenore tried to stay out of Fairmont’s politics as she found that the ruling class cared little enough about the problems of the peasants, so why should she care about theirs? She certainly had enough of her own to worry about, and none of the dukes had ever sent a servant to her door. Until now.

What could Lord Beaumont want?

When they were finally seated at the table, a cup of tea in front of each of them, Lenore said, “Your five minutes starts now.”

Cassia sipped from her cup and gazed at Lenore over the rim. “Lord Beaumont would like to woo you.”

“Woo me?” Lenore drew back as if Cassia had sent a dagger her way instead of words. “I’m a spinster.”

“You spin?” Surprise showed in the lift of Cassia’s eyebrows.

“No, I—well yes, I do.” Lenore shook her head, flummoxed that Cassia would assume the less common meaning of the word.

Cassia's gaze drifted to the window. "Do you spin the fleece from your ... animals?"

Goosebumps burst out on Lenore's skin at Cassia's choice of word. Llamas—real llamas—were plentiful in Fairmont and often domesticated. There was no reason Cassia wouldn't know what they were called. Unless she knew that Lenore's herd *weren't* llamas.

Lenore cleared her throat, gathered her wits, and ignored the question. "I'm an unmarried woman of a certain age who has no intention of changing her single status. Do you really want to spend your five minutes talking about spinning? Because I'm happy to oblige."

Cassia set her cup down and played absently with the bracelet on her wrist. As she spoke, her voice rose, filled with enthusiasm for her subject. "His Grace has a large estate, an adorable young daughter, and a very capable staff. He's a kind, thoughtful man who bears the responsibilities of his title with aplomb. He's firm in his beliefs, resolute in his convictions, loyal to his friends, protective of the realm—"

Lenore interrupted before Cassia could launch into a song listing the duke's virtues. "I understand His Grace is an absolute prize of a man, but why would he want to marry me?"

"Why would he not?" Cassia pushed up from her seat, and again her voice filled with passion. "His Grace is in need of a wife, a companion, a *partner*. He's not after a docile servant; he has plenty of those. He's not looking for a jewel to parade on his arm. He wants someone to keep him true. To challenge him when he wavers in his beliefs, to steer him straight when he veers off course—"

Lenore raised her eyebrows. "We've never even met."

Cassia dropped to her knee beside Lenore. "Madam, he wants to woo you. He's not proposing marriage. Not yet. He would like you both to get to know each other, to discover if you're a match."

Lenore fought not to roll her eyes. At least the duke didn't seem like a complete fool.

"You still haven't explained why he chose me. Or has His Grace sent a dozen different servants to a dozen different prospects?"

"No, madam." Cassia's voice dropped to a hushed whisper. "Only you. He saw you at the market in Grenham last Sunday and was entranced."

“By my beauty?” Sarcasm rolled thick across Lenore’s tongue. Any beauty she had was hidden under a layer of hard work. Even now, her deep bronze skin was covered in sweat and dirt, and were it not for the scarf, her hair would be decorated with strands of hay and strings of unicorn fleece.

“By your kindness,” Cassia shot back. “Your generosity, your industriousness, and your conviction.”

“And when did he get the chance to discover all these apparently wonderful traits?”

Cassia stood with a doleful sigh. “Well, I would tell you,” she said, her eyes downcast. “But I believe my five minutes are up.” She drained her tea then headed for the door but paused with her fingers on the handle. She glanced back, her expression innocent. “Unless you could spare me five more minutes tomorrow?”

A smile threatened to pull up the corners of Lenore’s lips, and she had to tell them very sternly to remain where they were. The young woman was certainly doing His Grace proud.

But Lenore didn’t have time for this nonsense, and she certainly wouldn’t encourage someone to woo her when she had no intention of marrying. She joined Cassia by the door. “Tell His Grace you tried your best, but this spinster is resolute in *her* convictions.”

Lenore offered her hand. Cassia hesitated only a moment before a rueful smile crossed her lips and she shook it. Her bracelet slipped forward and came to rest against Lenore’s thumb. A hum filled Lenore’s ears, slightly off-key. Like the buzz of an irritated wasp, it warned her to be wary.

Cassia pulled her hand free, breaking the spell. “Thank you for your time.”

She let herself out, and Lenore watched her go, frozen on the spot.

She was right. Cassia’s bracelet *was* unicorn thread. But that wasn’t all. It had been spun on a very special spindle, a *magical* spindle. One Lenore had vowed to keep safe. One that had been stolen over a decade ago. One Lenore would give anything to get back.

CASSIA HEADED FOR THE road where Grayson, the duke’s groom, was meant to be waiting with the bouncy, horse-drawn trap they’ve arrived on. He was

nowhere in sight, and faced with no other prospect but a long walk, Cassia chose to sit on the fence to wait.

She wasn't sure what to do now. Although she'd given it her best shot, she would have to return to the duke's estate and tell him she'd failed in the task he'd set her. He would most likely thank her for her efforts and send her on her way, and she'd never get the chance to sneak into his library and scour the land records for any reference to the witch's gingerbread house.

She wasn't entirely sure she could cope with another dead end.

She yanked her cravat off, balled it up, and shoved it into the pocket of her trousers.

"Wait! Cassia!"

Cassia slid off the fence and turned to face Lenore, who was jogging down the path toward her. She regretted removing her cravat as she smoothed her vest and stood to attention.

"How can I be of service, madam?" Cassia had no idea how real servants talked, but she'd decided to err on the side of fawning.

Lenore stopped on the other side of the fence and took a steadying breath. "I may have been a bit hasty."

"You were?" Cassia couldn't keep the delight from her voice.

Lenore held up her hand, a gesture Cassia was growing familiar with. "I'm not agreeing to anything. Not to let him woo me, and certainly not to a proposal of marriage. But"—a muscle in her cheek twitched—"if you were so inclined to come back tomorrow, I could spare you another five minutes to discuss the matter further."

Cassia was by no means practiced in the role of matchmaker, but she knew when someone was playing coy. And that was an extraordinary stroke of luck.

"I would be honored, and I'm sure His Grace will be quite understanding of your cautious approach."

Lenore turned back to the house, but after two steps, she glanced around again, her dark brown eyes boring into Cassia. "Maybe tomorrow you could wear something a bit more *practical*."

"Of course." Cassia wondered what she'd gotten herself into.

As she sat back on the fence to wait for Grayson, she tugged absently on her bracelet as if today was the day it would finally fall off. She didn't know what had happened to change Lenore's mind, but she felt like she'd

received a reprieve from the gallows. Five minutes wasn't much, but if it led to ten or fifteen she might be able to swing things to her favor.

And she certainly wouldn't mind spending more time with a woman who lived alone in the forest, staunchly defended her independence, and tended a herd of unicorns.

The trap drew to a stop in front of Cassia, pulling her out of her thoughts. It was drawn by a single horse, and the seat was only wide enough for two. Grayson shuffled over to give Cassia room as she pulled herself up.

The groom was more like the laconic farmhands she was used to than how she'd expected a duke's servant to be. His dark, curly hair hung untamed to his shoulders, his tan skin was marked on one arm by an intricate tattoo, his clothes consisted of sturdy woolen trousers and a rough linen shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and he smelled of a combination of hay and saddle oil.

He probably preferred working with the horses to chauffeuring random women around, but of course the duke's coachman couldn't be spared.

"You convince her to sell His Grace a llama yet?" he asked, his voice a low drawl.

"Not yet." Cassia gave him a confident smile. "But she's invited me back tomorrow to discuss the matter further."

"Again?" Grayson raised one eyebrow doubtfully.

"Yes," Cassia said, her tone bright. "Now tell me, is there somewhere around here I could buy an outfit like yours?"

Grayson raised his other eyebrow and geed the horse on. He didn't stop at the nearest village but pushed on for almost an hour and took a slight detour before coming to a village unlike any Cassia had seen before.

In general, the settlements in Fairmont attempted to keep the forest at bay. This village embraced it.

Instead of the road opening into a clearing, the buildings were built in, on, and around the trees. And Cassia could see why.

The trees were massive, some trunks the width of a small cottage, and none narrow enough to be toppled by even the largest two-person saw. The reason why people had chosen to settle here—instead of finding a spot they could clear—was probably lost to time, but settle they had.

Some buildings were inside the trees, though whether they'd been carved out or made in natural hollows wasn't obvious from the outside. Strangely

shaped mud huts were squeezed between the trunks, and still more clung to the sides of the trees, far above the ground, amongst the branches or on giant shelf fungi. Staircases spiraled up to them, and bridges made of vines hung between them. And everything had a raw, natural look, as if instead of being built, the buildings had simply *grown*.

Grayson parked the trap between two towering conifers. He held the reins loosely in one hand and pointed with the other. “Up there. Mistress Althea is the best tailor around.”

Cassia’s gaze rose until she had to shield her eyes from the sunlight filtering through the canopy. The building he’d pointed to looked like a giant moth perched on the bark, the wings a thatched roof that almost reached the platform underneath, dappled in color and texture so it was well camouflaged. “Thank you.”

She checked her small purse as she started the trek up the staircase. A decent collection of coppers remained, but only a few silvers. She hadn’t anticipated having to buy a new outfit again so soon, but she wasn’t ready to trade away the fine woolen clothes she was wearing. Maybe she could come to some sort of arrangement with the tailor and save herself some coins.

A bell tinkled as she pushed the door open. The hut—though it deserved a better name—was roomy inside, the tall, vaulted ceiling making it seem larger. Dozens of windows in the roof let in natural light. A counter stood in front of the back wall, and a doorway led *into* the trunk, covered by a curtain. Cassia wondered how large the rooms beyond were.

The curtain was brushed aside as a woman entered the room. Her white hair hung in a braid over her shoulder, but the only wrinkles in her cool brown skin were a few around her eyes, and she walked with the bounce of a young woman.

“How can I help?” she asked, her voice polite but reserved.

“Mistress Althea?”

The woman nodded.

“I’ve heard you’re the best tailor around, and I find myself rather overdressed,” Cassia said. “Do you have something more suitable for outside labor?”

“You’ve come to the right tailor.” Mistress Althea swept across the room to where shelves were stacked with neatly folded clothes. She pointed to

each shelf in turn. “Skirts, trousers, shirts, blouses.”

Cassia took her time looking through the different styles before settling on a simple peasant blouse and skirt and a pair of hard-wearing trousers.

“How much?”

“A silver each.”

She tried not to wince. If the finished products were as neatly sewn as the samples, they would be worth the price, but three silvers was a cost she couldn’t really afford. “I’ll just take one of each.”

Mistress Althea took her across the room to stand on a small stool in front of a tall mirror while she took her measurements. It wasn’t often that Cassia caught her own reflection, and she was always surprised not to see the undernourished child she’d once been.

After losing Avalon to the gingerbread house, her family had managed their food supply quite sufficiently with only three mouths to feed, and since she had left home, Cassia had prioritized meals over everything else. She was comfortably plump, with a solid core of muscle earned by felling trees and chopping firewood alongside her father. Not that she’d done much of that lately.

They headed to the counter where the tailor wrote the order out, gave Cassia a copy, and asked for one silver in advance. Cassia dug the coin out of her purse and slid it across the counter.

“Come back in an hour.”

“An hour?” Cassia gasped, surprised it could be done so quickly.

“We have an express service,” Mistress Althea said with an apologetic shrug, “but it doubles the price.”

“An hour is fine.” She didn’t bother to explain the misunderstanding.

Outside the tailor’s, she glanced down to where Grayson was leaning against the wheel of the trap, talking to a couple of children. One of them appeared to be fascinated with Grayson’s boots, attempting to undo the laces while Grayson kept nudging her away. The other climbed onto the seat of the trap, bounced a few times, and threw his arms up as if it was the most uncomfortable thing in the world. Grayson made a stunningly obvious *get down from there* gesture with one hand, and the boy reluctantly complied.

Instead of heading down the stairs immediately, Cassia wandered along the bridge that linked the tailor’s to the neighboring tree. She didn’t like the

way it swayed under her feet, and held tightly to the handrails until she found the relative stability of the next platform.

On the next bridge, she perfected a swagger that let her move with the swaying motion, and on the third, found she could walk quite happily without holding the vines in a death grip.

By the time her meandering path had taken her back to the ground, Grayson's small companions had gone.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said. "Only another half hour to go."

He nodded as if the delay didn't bother him.

"Who were your friends?" she asked, for something to say.

"My friends?"

"The children you were talking to. They looked troublesome."

His eyes narrowed, and instead of answering, he asked, "You never come here when you visit Lenore?"

Cassia knew from his question that she'd made an error. But she didn't know exactly what had made him suspect that Lenore wasn't a close family friend, as she'd told the duke.

"Not usually," she said carefully, trying to smooth his doubts with more lies. "It's a bit out of the way. And the last time I came, I was no bigger than those children. Lenore usually comes to visit us."

"Hmm," he said.

"How often do you come here? You seem very familiar with it."

He scanned the forest around them. "Been once or twice. It's on the way from the duke's summer home to his main estate."

"You've been working for His Grace for a while, then?"

"Long enough." He crossed his arms, and Cassia knew trying to get more information out of him would be like trying to free a goat from a blackberry bush.

She stood beside him in an uncomfortable silence, until she was due back at the tailor's. "Be ready to go as soon as I return. We've wasted enough time as it is." He raised his eyebrows, as if he thought she were blaming *him* for the delay, so she added, "If you please."

She took the short route back. When the bell jangled to announce her arrival, Mistress Althea once again appeared from behind the curtain. The clothes were bundled in her arms, ready exactly when she'd said they'd be. She showed Cassia to a small cubicle in the corner where she could change.

She tried on the trousers first and returned to the stool so the tailor could set the hems. Then Cassia tried on the blouse and skirt, which she declared to be perfect.

When the tailor disappeared behind the curtain to hem the trousers—which would take but a few minutes—Cassia grabbed her own clothes, but instead of changing back into them, she fled to the door. She opened it carefully, muffling the bell with her other hand, then ran down the stairs. When she reached the ground, she walked casually but quickly to where Grayson was waiting in the trap, ready to go.

He frowned as he looked down at her. “Mistress Althea didn’t wrap them up for you?”

“No, I told her I was in a rush.” She reached for the side of the trap to pull herself up, but Grayson slid over to block her.

He studied her for a moment before a faint jangle drew his gaze up. Without looking back at her and barely moving his lips, he said, “Twirl.”

“What?” Cassia shoved his knee, trying to get him to move.

He dropped his gaze to glare at her and ground out, “Do a damned twirl.”

It didn’t make any sense, but if it got him to move, she’d do what he wanted. She threw her old clothes onto his lap, stepped back, spread her arms wide, and spun in a circle so her skirt flared out around her.

He set the clothes aside and jumped down from the trap with such a wide grin on his face that Cassia was taken aback. “Superb!” he said, far louder than was necessary for Cassia to hear him. “I told you Mistress Althea is worth every coin.”

Before Cassia could ask what had caused the shift in his demeanor, a vine encircled her waist and pulled tight. She let out a surprised squawk as it lifted her off her feet, high into the air, and held her aloft in front of the tailor’s hut.

Mistress Althea stood with her hands on her hips, Cassia’s new trousers over her shoulder. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Cassia glanced at the ground far below her. Grayson was sprinting up toward them, taking the stairs two at a time. Suddenly his behavior made sense.

The shame of being caught flared in Cassia’s cheeks. She could turn the blush to her advantage, but she had to be careful. One wrong word would see her taking a shortcut to the ground.

“Oh my goodness,” she gasped, clasping her hands to her face. “You didn’t think I was leaving without settling the bill, did you?”

The tailor snorted. “You *were* leaving.”

“Oh, no, I wasn’t. I just thought ... well, while you were hemming my trousers, I would run down and show Grayson this beautiful needlework.” She pinched the fabric of her skirt in her fingers, as if she were about to curtsy. “It may be a simple raiment, but it twirls beautifully.”

As if she’d summoned him, Grayson reached the platform. He stood panting, his gaze flicking between her and the tailor. “This is ... a simple ... misunderstanding,” he puffed.

Mistress Althea studied him for a long moment. “You vouch for her?”

“I do,” he said.

The tailor turned back to Cassia. The vine drew her closer to the platform. “You owe me two silvers.”

“Of course.” Cassia dug into her purse for the coins.

“And a few coppers besides,” Grayson added. “For the inconvenience.”

Cassia gritted her teeth but selected the extra coins and held them out. “Here.”

Mistress Althea took the coins and threw the trousers at Cassia. She snatched them from the air before they could tumble to the ground like a dropped leaf.

“Our business is concluded,” the tailor said, her gaze shifting to Grayson. “Take care you do not tarnish your reputation by vouching for the wrong person.”

Grayson winced and opened his mouth to say something, but the tailor was already walking away.

The vine yanked Cassia backward, swept her toward the ground at a gut-churning speed, and deposited her onto the seat of the trap with a severe lack of concern for her posterior. Grayson jogged back from the tailor’s tree, leapt onto the seat beside her, and urged the horse into motion.

He didn’t say anything until they were well down the road and away from the village.

“Why would you try to steal from the elves?” he growled, his gaze fixed on the road ahead.

“What?” Cassia gasped. “Mistress Althea is an elf?”

He gave her his version of a disdainful look: lip curled, eyebrow raised. “No, of course not. She’s a dryad, a tree spirit. How else could she control the vines?”

“Well excuse me for not knowing the difference between an elf and a dryad.” Though it did explain why Mistress Althea’s appearance was slightly off, why she seemed both young and old.

“You haven’t been here before, have you?”

“I told you, not since—”

“No, you haven’t been anywhere *near* here. Because Mistress Althea is famous in these parts. And you would’ve known that those *children* I was speaking to weren’t children, because there are no children in that village, because elves aren’t born, they sprout fully grown from special seed pods. They’re just *small*.”

“I—” Cassia didn’t know how to lie her way out of that when the truth of the matter was so obvious. She sighed. “I’m sorry that you had to vouch for me.”

He snorted. “I took you to the finest tailor in Fairmont, and you returned the favor by trying to swindle the poor elves who sewed your clothes.”

“Elves made my clothes?” she gasped. And if she continued gasping at this rate, she would likely soon pass out.

“Who else can make them that good that fast?” he asked, as if the answer was obvious. Which it was. No one could.

“I’m sorry,” she said again, and this time she meant it. “And thank you. Your quick thinking saved me.”

Now it was Grayson’s turn to let out a sigh. “Just don’t do it again. They don’t deserve to be taken advantage of.”

“I don’t think there’s any chance of that. Not with Mistress Althea’s ability to enforce payment.”

“Fairmont would be a better place if ...” He trailed off, and Cassia wondered if he would ever finish his thought when he finally said, “If everyone who was weak or vulnerable had someone like Mistress Althea to stand up for them.”

THE HORSE KEPT UP a steady pace and they arrived back at the duke’s summer home after another hour’s travel. The two-story manor house, with

sprawling grounds carved out of the forest, sat on the outskirts of the coastal town of Grenham.

Cassia's jaw had dropped the first time she'd seen the massive house, and it attempted to do the same again as Grayson drove the trap around to the stables. He jumped down, retrieved Cassia's small bag from the trunk behind the seat, and held it out to her. Cassia ducked into an empty stall to change back into her woolen vest and trousers, before hiding her new clothing in her bag.

"I can escort you in, if you want," Grayson said.

Cassia gave him her most reassuring smile. "Thank you, but I'll be fine."

She shoved down the doubts that were threatening to swamp her, strode confidently to the back door, and told the housekeeper she was there to see the duke.

"His Grace has been expecting you," the woman said, ushering her to a small anteroom to wait.

After a few minutes that stretched to eternity, a footman came to escort her upstairs and into the duke's empty study. The young man said nothing but shut the door with an ominous thud.

The study's windows gave a good view of the setting sun, the golden glow warming the wood paneling on the walls. Cassia glanced at the closed door before mincing over to the duke's desk, which was dotted with artwork and trinkets that had clearly been made by his daughter. She quickly rifled through the drawers, but finding nothing of relevance, she wandered across the room to skim the titles of the books in the bookcase.

When the duke arrived, Cassia was admiring a large portrait of the duke's wife, who had died some years earlier. The duchess was staring straight out of the canvas, a challenge in her gaze. Her dark brown skin almost glowed, her long, dark hair hung in tight curls, a sword was in one hand, and a shiny silver helmet was under her other arm.

Cassia turned to the duke and gave a short bow. "Your Grace."

The duke was tall and broad-shouldered, with tan skin, short dark hair touched with gray at the temples, and a trim goatee.

"Tell me," he said, as he strode across the room toward his desk. "Were you successful?"

"Unfortunately, Mistress Lenore was too busy to see me today. As you can imagine, caring for her llamas requires a great deal of time."

“That sounds like merely an excellent excuse to send you packing.” He took his seat and gestured that Cassia was free to do the same.

“Indeed, I would have assumed she was brushing me off, despite the many years our families have been friends, but she asked me to return tomorrow to discuss your request.”

“There is still hope then?”

Before Cassia could answer, the door burst open and Felicity, the duke’s young daughter, came barreling in. “Did you get it, did you get it, did you get it?”

All of eight years old, dark skinned like her mother, and with long curly hair that hung loose and bounced as she ran, Felicity threw herself into her father’s arms.

“Not yet, my pet,” he said before kissing the top of her head. “You’ll have to wait a little while longer.”

Cassia expected the child to throw a tantrum of some sort, but all she did was poke out her bottom lip and ask, “How much longer?”

“Not too much longer,” the duke said vaguely.

“Promise?” Felicity asked, her eyes widening as she raised her cuteness factor so high that it would take an iron will for the duke to deny her.

“I promise. Now off you go.”

Happy with the promise, the girl ran from the room, pausing briefly beside her mother’s portrait to blow a kiss and murmur, “Love you, Mama.”

Once the door had closed behind Felicity, the duke turned to Cassia, and his voice came out stern. “Tell Grayson to take you back to Mistress Lenore’s tomorrow and get me one of those llamas.”

CHAPTER THREE

USUALLY, ONE SOCIAL INTERACTION a day was enough for Lenore. Unfortunately, she'd already been expecting visitors that afternoon.

When she'd been at the market in Grenham on Sunday, two older women had approached her, wanting some advice. They'd recently moved from the distant city of Windweald to a nearby llama farm, though they had precious little experience with the animals and clearly hadn't realized what they were taking on. They were spinners and knitters, and although they were experts at turning fiber into yarn and yarn into garments, they were having trouble getting the fleece off the animals.

Lenore had been disinclined to help them. But they'd offered her a training fee, and she pitied the poor creatures who could suffer under the women's hands, so she'd agreed. She'd told them how to find her house—even drawn them a little map—and told them to bring a llama with them.

Marika and Rowena arrived shortly after lunch. They lived a little under an hour's walk away.

"We're practically neighbors," Marika gushed. She was solidly built with pale, freckled skin, short hair, and a ready smile. Rowena was taller and slimmer with an olive complexion and long, dark hair, which was pulled into a simple braid and starting to turn gray.

Lenore tried not to judge people by their appearance, but she suspected Marika was the more likely of the pair to be able to handle the llama. The animal in question—definitely a llama and not a unicorn—was a placid male who followed along happily as they led him into an empty stall in the barn. There, Lenore gave a brief demonstration of how she sheared llamas, which was quite a different experience to shearing unicorns, since they couldn't skewer you if they took umbrage at their treatment.

Each of the women took a turn with the clippers. Marika's hands trembled somewhat, but Lenore suspected that was more from fear of accidentally cutting the animal than of the animal itself. Rowena frowned as she concentrated, and adapted quickly when Lenore gave her tips on how to hold the clippers so she wouldn't catch the llama's skin or give herself blisters.

They were both quick learners and hard workers, listening attentively while Lenore showed them how to clean and prepare the fleeces for spinning. They thanked her profusely, paid her a silver for her time and expertise, and were leading the llama out of the barn when Pudding trotted out of the forest.

"One of yours?" Marika asked. "She's a beauty."

Pudding circled around them all, snapped playfully at the llama's ears, and trotted away before stopping to look back at them, as if inviting the llama to join her. The llama perked up immediately and let out a low orle. Apparently, he was keen.

"Oh," Marika said, letting out an awkward laugh.

"Let him have a run around if you'd like," Lenore said. "The property's fenced."

Marika untied his lead, and the llama chased after Pudding.

"You may as well stay for a drink," Lenore said. "They'll be a while."

She made a batch of cold fruit tea, and they sat outside in the sun to drink.

Although she'd rather have sat quietly, she engaged the women in small talk to be polite. In the end, she found it was quite nice to talk to someone who knew as much about spinning as she did, someone who was fascinated by plies and dyes, hooks and needles, whorls and twists.

"Is it just me," Rowena murmured, squinting against the bright sunlight, "or is your llama shimmering?"

Lenore's head snapped around. She didn't often meet anyone who recognized her unicorns for what they were, and now she'd met two in a single day.

"Looks normal to me," Marika said. "It must be your eyes." She pushed to her feet, letting out a groan as if her joints ached, then reached out a hand to help Rowena stand.

"This was lovely," Rowena said, somewhat shyly.

“An hour’s really not too long to travel,” Marika added. “We could come and visit again.”

“Or you could come to us,” said Rowena, “if you’d like to see our farm. It’s really a beautiful spot. And we could supply the tea next time.”

The women’s eagerness hit Lenore so hard it almost knocked her over. It must’ve been difficult for them, moving from the city and realizing country folk took a long time to warm to new arrivals.

Unfortunately, Lenore was no different. “Thank you for the offer,” she said. “But I’m kept very busy here, and I travel a lot.” As the women’s faces fell, she felt compelled to add, “Though I might be able to stop in the next time I’m passing your way.”

“That would be wonderful.” Marika described where they lived and Lenore, more familiar with the area than they were, knew she’d be able to find them if she ever wanted to.

As she watched them retrieve their llama, still holding each other’s hands, she couldn’t imagine she ever would.

CASSIA SPENT THE NIGHT in the town of Grenham, which was nestled in a small bay on the southern coast and sheltered by tall cliffs. She liked the noise and bustle of the taverns, the salty scent of the ocean, and the reprieve from pretending to be a noble’s servant.

She found a tavern that was full but not overflowing, where the patrons weren’t being entertained by either a band of musicians or troupe of players.

She bought four mugs of ale—using too many of her precious remaining coins—approached a table of young women who appeared to be either sailors or fishers, and encouraged them to invite her to join them by telling a sob story about being abandoned by her friends, and offering them the ales.

Once her throat was nicely lubricated, the words started to flow, and she told them the tale of her encounter with the dryad.

She embellished it, of course.

The dryad was evil. The elves were prisoners. Cassia was the hero attempting to rescue them.

The vine almost crushed her, the dryad's touch turned her skin to bark, and only her skill as a woodcutter's daughter allowed her to wield a magical axe that the elves gave her to damage the dryad's soul tree enough to put the evil spirit into a magical sleep.

Before she was halfway through the telling, the whole tavern had fallen silent to listen. When she finished, she flourished her hands like an illusionist revealing a trick. "It took two days before my skin returned to normal, but my suffering was a small price to pay to free those poor elves."

Murmurs of shock and awe rippled through the tavern. Cassia opened her purse wide and wandered between the tables. Even those who doubted the veracity of her tale were still entertained, and their gratuities surpassed the coins she'd spent during the day.

Early the next morning, dressed in the simple peasant blouse and skirt and feeling more like herself than she had in days, she wandered back to the duke's house and met Grayson at the stables. They'd barely left the grounds when he dug his fingers into the inside pocket of his coat and pulled out five coppers.

"Here," he said.

"What's that for?" Cassia asked without taking them. The coins gleamed against the warm tan of his palm.

He cleared his throat. "I made you pay Mistress Althea extra yesterday, and that wasn't right. So here."

Cassia studied the coins a moment longer, her fingers itching to take them. "No," she said. "You *were* right. Paying extra corrected my mistake and allowed our escape. I doubt she would have let me go so readily had you not suggested it."

"It wasn't my money to promise, and I know you didn't have much to spare."

"Forget about it." Cassia gave him a charming grin as she reached over to close his fingers around the coins. Then she showed him her now-heavy purse. "I'm sure a groom doesn't make as much in a day as I did last night."

"How did you get that?" The horror in his expression suggested that he assumed she'd either stolen or swindled it.

If that's what he thought, she didn't want to disappoint him.

"Well, there was a group of orphans in the town square last night, singing shanties while they repaired torn fishing nets with locks of their own hair,

trying to raise enough money to patch the hole in the roof of their orphanage. While they were busy, I bashed the one holding the coins over the head, stole the fruits of their labor, and spat on him for good measure.”

Grayson’s voice came out as flat as his expression. “You stole it. From orphans.”

“That’s what I said.” She stared at him, knowing he didn’t believe her, challenging him to call her a liar.

“I hope you adopted a couple of them, at least.” The corner of his mouth twitched, and he paused, as if attempting to control it. “They sound like hard workers.”

“I did, actually. I’d introduce you, but I’ve already put them to work in my gold mine.”

He cleared his throat in what might have been an attempt to cover a laugh, and Cassia settled back in the seat, satiated by the notion she’d managed to amuse him.

When they arrived at Lenore’s, Cassia found the older woman in the barn with another of her animals.

There were two ways to tell unicorns from llamas. The easiest, Cassia found, was to cover one eye and to gaze past the animal as if you weren’t looking at it at all. If it was a unicorn, its fleece took on a silvery shimmer. The other way was to rile them up until their horns grew, then hope you didn’t get stabbed.

Cassia pretended to yawn, rubbed at her right eye, and caught the shimmer with her left.

“Nice outfit,” Lenore said, watching her over the stall wall. “I approve.”

“Thank you.” Cassia plucked at her skirt and bobbed a brief curtsy. “It has pockets.”

Lenore led the unicorn out of the stall. She must’ve gotten an earlier start today, because the animal was already neatly shorn. Cassia stepped aside as it trotted past her and began to frolic in the paddock. Lenore retrieved the fleece and laid it out on a table that was little more than a frame covered in chicken wire.

She beckoned Cassia closer. “Have you ever prepared a fleece for spinning?”

“No, I’ve never had the pleasure.”

“We start by discarding the fleece at the edges.” She pulled off a handful then plucked some from the middle to show Cassia how the rejected strands were shorter, straighter, and contained more of the outer guard hair. “You can start on the other side.”

Cassia circled the table. “Will you hold it against His Grace if I perform incompetently?”

Lenore didn’t look up from where she was deftly pulling away the edge of the fleece. “Only one way to find out.”

Cassia fell to the task, being careful not to catch too many of the long fibers. It had been ten years since she’d felt unicorn fleece between her fingers—and then it hadn’t been raw like this—but she hadn’t forgotten the peculiar combination of lightness and roughness.

Lenore finished her half first and came to watch over Cassia’s shoulder, checking the edge before murmuring, “Well done.”

Cassia suppressed a shiver. Ten years ago, praise like that would’ve meant the world to her. But she didn’t need it anymore.

Lenore swept the discarded fleece into a wooden pail.

“Do you throw it away?” Cassia asked, wondering if she might be able to take some for herself.

“No, of course not. It’s just better suited for a different purpose.”

Next, they scoured the entire fleece for any strands that were short, or stained with tree gum, leaves, or manure. Then Lenore scooped up the fleece and bundled it into a contraption she called a tumbler. It looked like a barrel made of more chicken wire on a wooden frame suspended on a stand with a handle on one end. The inside of the frame had dozens of long nails poking toward the center of the barrel, for the purpose of separating the fleece, as Lenore explained.

She pointed to the handle, and Cassia dutifully turned it, making the tumbler spin.

“So, tell me when I met this duke,” Lenore said.

Lenore was clever. Cassia had to give her that. Focused as she was on turning the heavy barrel, it was harder to spin a lie. Luckily, most of what she had to say was based on the truth.

“Did I mention His Grace has a young daughter? One of their family traditions is to attend the local markets around the realm. They’ve been staying at the duke’s summer house near Grenham, and they saw you at the

market last Sunday, and Felicity, his daughter, was incredibly enamored with your animals. I believe she spent an hour petting them and asking you a string of questions.”

She risked a glance up from the barrel to gauge Lenore’s reaction. Half a smile crossed the woman’s face.

“I remember her.”

“Then you might also remember her father offering to buy one of them.”

“Ah ...” Lenore’s expression settled into one of distaste. “I didn’t expect a duke to look so ... ordinary.”

Though Cassia hadn’t known the duke long, his personal style did seem rather understated. Each item of his clothing probably cost more than Cassia’s entire wardrobe combined, but they weren’t gaudy. At the market, he’d looked like any noble with a small estate.

“He was disappointed you refused to sell, of course.” It didn’t hurt to be upfront about that. “But he was impressed by your conviction and touched by how patient you were with Felicity.”

“I told you, I’ll never agree to sell my animals.”

“And His Grace respects that.”

Cassia was quite willing to say whatever it took to bring Lenore around to the idea of being wooed—because that was the lie she’d chosen and the only way to spend more time with the woman and eventually convince her to sell the duke a unicorn—but it would help if she knew what angle to take. It didn’t hurt to be up front about that either. “I’ve already mentioned what His Grace is looking for in a partner, but what would *you* look for, if you were looking?”

“Oh, I’ve never really thought about it.” Lenore rubbed absently at the back of her neck. “I’ve been a spinster since I was sixteen.”

“You can’t be a spinster at sixteen!” Cassia protested.

Some people married that young, of course, but most people who wed did so for the first time in their early twenties.

Then again, she’d never met anyone who claimed the title of spinster, either. It was usually a term used to describe someone else.

“In my case, I was. I’m not unmarried through lack of choice but inclination. And I made that decision young.”

“But ...” Cassia let the handle spin to a halt, her surprise pulling an honest question from her. “Aren’t you lonely?”

“I have my animals. I have family I visit every now and then. I have a calling which keeps me busy.” She made a circle with her finger, and Cassia began turning the handle again. “What about you? You’re only young. Do you have a partner? What would you want in one?”

“Oh ...” Cassia focused on working the tumbler. “I suppose I have something of a calling too. But if I was looking to marry, I suppose I’d want someone who made me feel like a priority even when the weight of the realm was on their mind, who treated me like the only person in the room when others were clamoring for their attention, who saw me as an equal despite my lowly start ...” She shrugged. It seemed ridiculous to refine someone down to a few select attributes, and yet, that was exactly what she was trying to do with the duke.

“And what would you do if the duke wanted to woo you?” Lenore asked.

“I’d tell him he’s far too old for me.”

Lenore let out a laugh that was so genuine, it made Cassia feel bad for lying to her.

“I guess,” she continued, “that getting to know someone is the best way to find out if you want to get to know them *better*.”

Lenore let out an impressed “Huh,” and said, “You can stop. It should be clean enough.” She set a basket in front of the barrel. “Scoop it into here, but—”

Cassia opened the lid, reached her arms in, and caught her finger on one of the nails. She muttered a curse as she dumped the fleece into the basket.

“—be careful of the nails,” Lenore finished. “Are you hurt?”

“Only a little.” Cassia showed her the blood trailing along her finger.

Lenore ushered her out of the barn and into the house, sat her at the kitchen table, and set about tending the wound as if it were a life-threatening gash. As she held a cloth bandage against the cut to halt the bleeding, her fingers drifted to Cassia’s bracelet.

“This is beautiful,” Lenore murmured. “Where did you get it?”

“I made it,” Cassia said.

Lenore’s fingertips edged under the bracelet to press against Cassia’s wrist, as if she were checking her pulse. “Do you mean you found it and joined the ends together?”

“No, I mean I spun the fiber into thread, twisted the plies together, and locked it around my wrist.” Cassia sucked in a breath, as if that would pull

the words back in. She was usually so careful to keep the bracelet hidden, and if anyone noticed it, she always brushed away any questions by claiming it was a family heirloom. She never *ever* told anyone the truth.

She tried to pull her hand away, but Lenore's grip tightened around her fingers, sending a flare of pain through the cut. A coolness spread from where Lenore's palm was pressed against the hers, as if she held a handful of snow there.

Lenore lifted her gaze, and her eyes were as cool as her hand. "Where did you get the fiber?"

Cassia shoved to her feet, knocking her chair over, and tried to pull away again. Lenore didn't flinch; she didn't fight, but she didn't yield either. It was as if Cassia's hand was trapped in the heart of an icicle. "Let me go."

"Where did you get the fiber?" Lenore repeated, as the chill spread up Cassia's arm.

She had no idea what would happen if the frost reached her heart. Would she die? Or worse, become an empty husk of a woman?

No.

She wouldn't let that happen. She'd hadn't killed one witch to fall victim to another.

"From a witch," she said, and the coolness retreated.

Lenore's eye twitched. "What witch?"

"Her name was Helene." Cassia's arm thawed further. Encouraged, she kept talking. "She was old when I first met her. And she lived in a house made of gingerbread. And I killed her. But she didn't stay dead. And when she came back, she was younger than before. She gave me the fiber. And showed me how to spin it. But when she inspected my work, she dismissed it as substandard and tossed it aside. So I picked it up and looped it around my wrist, and the ends closed, and I haven't been able to get it off since. But I don't mind, because it's the only thing I have to remind me I didn't dream that house or the witch or the fact that I had to leave my sister behind."

The feeling returned to Cassia's fingers, and she yanked her hand back, and this time, Lenore let her go.

The spinster leaned back in her seat. "Could you find the witch's house again?"

Even though the cold had gone, Cassia rubbed at her skin as if she were trying to bring the warmth back, but Lenore's words did a better job. "You believe me?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"My parents didn't."

"But *I* know you're not lying." She turned her hand up to reveal a silver brooch cupped in her palm, shaped like a daffodil.

"What is that?" Cassia asked. "What did you do to me?"

"I counteracted that." Lenore pointed at Cassia's bracelet. "You don't know what it is, do you?"

"I know it's made from unicorn fleece," Cassia said, as if the words could form some sort of shield. "Just like I know those aren't llamas you've been shearing."

Lenore rose from her chair and Cassia skittered backward, even though she suspected that if Lenore wanted to attack her, she wouldn't have to cross the room to do it.

"Do you have time for a cup of tea?" Lenore asked. "I find a story easier to tell with something to drink."

WHILE LENORE MADE THE tea, Cassia stood like a cornered llama, eying the door. But Lenore wasn't going to stand on ceremony. She was too tired for that nonsense.

"Forgive me," she began, as she brought the cups to the table, "if this tale meanders a bit in the telling. But it really is best to start at the beginning."

Cassia's gaze shifted from the door to her cup of tea then to Lenore, before she nodded.

"Long, long ago, in a faraway land, a child was born. This child was the son of a king, and unfortunately, shortly after his birth, a fairy predicted his demise. Before his twenty-first summer, the young man would prick his finger on a poisoned spindle and die. Now, as the story goes, the fairy was able to offer the baby a gift, and the gift she chose was that he would not die but instead fall into a magical sleep."

"Why wouldn't she just make him not die full stop? Or not prick his finger?"

Rather than being annoyed at the interruption, Lenore was pleased by Cassia's interest. "Some things cannot be avoided."

"That's ridiculous," Cassia muttered.

"Whether death or a magical sleep was the young prince's fate, the king hoped to avoid it by destroying all the spindles and spinning wheels in the land."

Cassia shuffled closer. "That seems like a gross overreaction."

"Any spinners that could flee with their spindles did so, spreading across the Seven Realms in an attempt to preserve their livelihoods. Those that couldn't were forced to learn a new trade. And thread and yarn have been imported into that land ever since. But that's not the point of our story."

Cassia took another step closer, her posture relaxing.

"Most of the spinners in that land spun ordinary fiber into ordinary thread, but there were a few who were closer to witches and used special spindles to spin rare fiber into magical thread."

"Magical how?" Cassia asked.

Lenore raised her eyebrows. "Some secrets are not for outsiders."

Cassia snorted but didn't argue.

"To preserve their skills and knowledge and secrets, these spinners formed the Order of Spinsters."

One such Spinster had come to Lenore's village, driving a covered wagon pulled by two animals that Lenore now knew were unicorns. Lenore was sixteen summers old then, and her family had been living in the United Duchies of Fairmont for so many generations that no one considered them foreigners anymore.

The Spinster had parked her wagon on the village green, set out a sign advertising trinkets, favors, and fortunes, and loudly warned her unicorns that if they spat at any potential customers and scared them off, she would put sacks over their heads.

Lenore, who'd been relaxing nearby with two other village girls, nodded toward the Spinster's wagon. "Do you fancy having your fortunes told?"

Carlie and Zanna were both gazing at some of the village boys, who were competing in feats of strength.

"Soon," Carlie murmured.

Lenore knew from past experience that "soon" actually meant "once the boys have stopped showing off," which would be exactly never. She left the

girls to their gazing and strode over to the Spinster's wagon.

The woman was older than Lenore's mother, with gray encroaching on her brown hair and a decent supply of wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and mouth. She smiled when Lenore approached. "Come, child, what can I tempt you with?"

An open compartment in the side of the wagon was stuffed with everything Lenore expected from a spinner: balls of yarn, soft woolen hats, intricate lace, but there were other things too. Fine silver necklaces, bracelets woven like collections of vines, hair clips embellished with macramé designs.

Lenore selected a brooch that resembled an owl. It sat heavy and cool in her hand, as if it carried a gravity the fine silver thread alone could not possess. She traced her finger over the single thread from the owl's foot, up through the twists and turns of the body, around the large eyes, and back down the body to the other foot.

"A wise choice," the Spinster murmured.

Lenore jumped and a blush heated her cheeks. "Did you make this?"

"I made everything here." The Spinster gazed lovingly at her wares. "Spun the fiber into yarn, knitted it, knotted it, wove it together."

Lenore's hand closed around the brooch. She was loathe to part with it, though it seemed a frivolous use of her hard-earned coins. "But surely you can't spin silver."

"Can't I?" the Spinster asked in an amused voice before leaning in and whispering, "I'll let you in on a secret. The silver fleece comes from my llamas."

Lenore glanced past the woman to where the animals grazed. They were both cream colored and dirty from the road.

"If you cover one eye and squint, you'll see it."

Feeling slightly ridiculous, Lenore had covered one eye, squinted her other, and stared at the unicorns, who still looked like dusty llamas. Just as she was about to give up, certain she was the target of a misguided jest, their fleece started to glow, as if the moon had sent a beam to outshine the sun for one brief moment. Lenore blinked and the effect was gone.

"Would you like to try?"

Considering that the alternative was to return to her friends, who were still ogling the boys, Lenore accepted the woman's offer.

The Spinster retrieved a box full of spindles, each set in its own compartment, protected by a soft fabric lining, and told Lenore to pick one. She took each out carefully, turned it over in her hand, admired the smooth whorl, and traced her fingers over the carvings on the shaft before placing it back in the box. When she pulled out a spindle made of golden alder, her heart seemed to sing.

“This one,” she murmured.

“Are you sure?” the Spinster asked. “There are others you haven’t—”

“This one,” Lenore repeated firmly.

The Spinster took a sample of the silvery unicorn fleece, attached it to the spindle, and showed Lenore how to spin. She took to it immediately. The thread hummed as she drew the twist up, and if she made the tension too loose or uneven, it would fall off-key. With the hum as her guide, she lost herself in the spinning, and when she ran out of fiber and broke the spell, the world seemed unreasonably bright and loud.

The Spinster had packed up her wares, though the day was still young.

“Can I offer you a ride home?” she asked.

“You’re leaving already? You haven’t sold a thing.”

The Spinster smiled. “There are more important things than selling a few trinkets.”

Cassia dropped into the chair opposite Lenore, yanking her out of her memories. The young woman sipped at her tea. “So what you’re saying is, my witch had one of these magical spindles?”

Lenore grimaced. She hated when people wanted to jump to the good bit of the story. “Every Spinster in the Order chooses an apprentice to train and pass her spindles on to. I was sixteen when I joined the Order as a neophyte, and four years later my mentor, Faye, retired and gave her spindles to me.” The next part burned Lenore’s throat as she spoke the words. “A month later, they were stolen.”

“By the witch?”

Lenore’s grimace deepened. “I know my spindles, and your bracelet was spun on one.” She paused. “It was made of rosewood, wasn’t it?”

Cassia’s expression tightened as she nodded.

“You asked what I did to you.” Lenore picked up the brooch from where she’d left it on the table. The silver thread had been knotted into the shape of a daffodil, but the outer petals were abnormally large. “The thread in this

brooch was spun on the same spindle as your bracelet, but the balance of magic is different.”

She closed her hand around the brooch, letting its hum seep into her skin and flow through her veins. Then she set it aside. She shouldn’t be careless with her next words.

“Your bracelet encourages you to be less than forthcoming with the truth. That brooch does the opposite.”

Cassia sat perfectly still, and Lenore worried that she’d been too blunt. Eventually, the young woman said, “What are you accusing me of?”

“I’m not accusing you of anything. I’m merely stating facts. How long have you been wearing it?”

Cassia’s eyes narrowed. “Not long.”

Lenore tossed the brooch across the table, and Cassia caught it on instinct. “How long?”

“Ten years.” Cassia hissed and dropped the brooch as if it had burned her.

“If you don’t take it off soon, you may find that the vice has become permanent. That’s why I stick to brooches and hairclips. Easy to remove.”

“How do I take it off, then?”

Lenore shrugged. “My scissors would do it, but they were stolen along with my spindles. I know a few techniques you can try, but in the end, it’s your spinning, your magic, so it’s up to you to figure it out.”

“My magic? I’m not a witch. I don’t *have* magic.”

“The bracelet says otherwise.”

Cassia’s hand drifted back to the brooch, and she traced her finger around the petals. “Well, if I’m a witch, I’m a terrible one, or Helene wouldn’t have tossed my thread aside and kept Avalon’s.” She gave the brooch a disgusted look and shoved it across the table.

“Your sister spun a thread too? And the witch chose to keep her and let you go?”

“She didn’t let me go. Avalon sacrificed herself so I could escape.”

Cassia’s voice hitched and her gaze lost focus. “Helene didn’t seem to care. Even when Avalon was caught. It was like she’d forgotten about me. Do you think if I’d spun a perfect thread, she would’ve kept me instead? Eaten me first? Was she trying to ingest Avalon’s magic? Would I have given her indigestion?”

“She *ate* your sister?” Lenore’s stomach lurched. She knew Helene was bad, but she’d never heard of someone trying to gain power that way.

Cassia sank into her seat, deflated. “I assume so. Avalon was alive when I left, but the witch had been threatening to eat us for weeks.”

Lenore reached across the table and laid her hand over Cassia’s. “I don’t want to give you false hope, but I’ve never heard of a cannibalistic witch. If she wanted Avalon’s magic, she wouldn’t eat her. She would keep her alive.”

Cassia let out a sob, and her voice trembled as she spoke. “She might still be alive?”

“It’s possible.” She squeezed Cassia’s hand. “Could you find the house again?”

“No!” Cassia pulled her hand free to scrub at her face. “I know the general area, but I searched for *ten years*. It was as if it had disappeared. It’s gone. Or maybe it was never there.”

“Or maybe it’s hidden.”

Some color came back into Cassia’s face.

“You may have spent ten years looking, but this time you’ll have magic on your side.”

“You’ll help me?”

“We have a common goal. I think we could help each other.” Lenore leaned forward. “Tell your duke that I agree to being wooed, but that I have to go on a journey. If he would permit you to accompany me, you could regale me with tales of his splendor and sing his praises. Do you think he would agree?”

Cassia chewed on her lip then nodded.

Lenore sat back, satisfied. She had no interest in being wooed and no intention of breaking her vow, but there was no harm in telling the duke she would give him a chance. She could always decline his proposal when it came. For all she knew, once he got to know her, he would decide that he wasn’t interested.

And she would endure a dozen men’s amorous advances if it meant Cassia could help her find the witch’s house and get her spindles back.

She would finally have her chance to make right what she’d done wrong all those years ago.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE JOURNEY BACK TO the duke's summer home near Grenham passed in near silence. Grayson seemed relieved to be returning but said more with a raised eyebrow than he did with words. That was fine with Cassia. She needed time to think.

She'd been trying to find a way into the duke's house for a month, and had followed him and his daughter to the Grenham market where she'd overheard him telling Felicity that Lenore had refused to sell him a llama. The girl had been distraught, and His Grace had promised to buy her a whole herd of llamas as soon as they got home. But Felicity didn't want any old llamas. She wanted one of the *special* llamas. The fact that the young girl could see the unicorns for what they were suggested she had a touch of magic about her.

Cassia had seen her chance, slipped around the duke's personal guards, begged his forgiveness for the interruption, explained that Lenore was a dear family friend, and offered to use her influence to persuade Lenore to sell him a llama.

The fact that she'd made the offer in front of Felicity meant the duke couldn't turn her down without upsetting his daughter further. He probably didn't hold out much hope Cassia could do what she offered, but even if she failed, he would be no worse off, so he'd agreed.

Now she had to convince him that wooing Lenore was the best way to get her to sell him a special llama.

Cassia tugged at her bracelet.

It probably would have been easier to be honest with Lenore. If the Spinster could help her find the gingerbread house then Cassia would have no need to browse the records in the duke's library. But she'd held her tongue when she'd had the opportunity to tell the truth.

Because if they failed, Cassia would still need to get a unicorn for Felicity, and getting Lenore to know—and hopefully feel sympathy for—the duke was the best idea she had to achieve that.

No. It was better to stick to her lies, no matter how ill-conceived they were, until she and Lenore had either succeeded or failed.

“That’s pretty,” Grayson grunted, and it took Cassia a moment to realize he was talking about her bracelet and not the scenery.

“Oh, thank you. It’s a family heirloom.” She tugged down her sleeve as Lenore’s words came back to her.

Your bracelet encourages you to be less than forthcoming with the truth.

She’d certainly spun plenty of lies during the past ten years, and she was deeply entangled in another one. Grayson already suspected she was a liar, and there was no reason to lie to him about the bracelet. Even if he did assume she’d stolen it, it was unlikely he’d care enough to accuse her when he had no proof.

“At least, that’s what I tell people.” Her throat felt parched, like she hadn’t drunk anything for a week. “But it’s really just a discarded scrap of silver thread.”

Grayson looked at her askance. There was no exclamation of surprise. No accusation of theft. The only sound he made was a nonplussed, “Huh.”

Cassia relaxed into her seat and enjoyed what now felt like a companionable silence.

Lenore didn’t know everything about her. Cassia could be forthcoming. A thin string of silver didn’t control her, no matter how much magic she’d somehow imbued it with. She could stop lying any time she wanted. And she would. As soon as she’d located the gingerbread house and discovered Avalon’s fate.

AGAIN, CASSIA WAS MADE to wait before being escorted to the duke’s study. This time, he was already seated behind his desk when the footman ushered her inside.

She gave a short bow. “Your Grace.”

“Were you successful this time?” he asked.

“I’m afraid to say that I find myself in a most delicate position.”

His eyes narrowed. “How so?”

“Lenore is amenable to trading one of her llamas, but her price may not be to your liking.”

“Tell her to name her price. I’m certain I can afford it.”

Cassia perched on the edge of the chair in front of the duke’s desk. “Your Grace, may I be blunt?”

“Please.”

“The price Lenore requested is *you*.”

The duke must’ve been used to dealing with a whole range of surprising demands as a ruler of the realm, and he showed no visible reaction to Cassia’s pronouncement. “She demands my hand in marriage?”

“Demands? No, of course not. But she is rather infatuated with you, and if you would deign to spend some time with her, even woo her, I’m certain she could be convinced to part with one of the llamas that your dear Felicity so desires.”

The duke ran his fingers through his hair and glanced at the portrait of his dead wife. “I cannot marry again,” he murmured.

“You wouldn’t have to,” Cassia said, dropping her voice. “Lenore has no interest in trapping you in a loveless marriage. She is entranced by the fantasy that once you’ve spent some time together, you’ll fall in love with her. You simply have to play along until you’ve secured a llama, and then you can let her down gently.”

The duke’s gaze didn’t move from the portrait. He let out a long sigh. “I will not lie to this poor woman about my intentions, and I have no intention of marrying her. I’m afraid Felicity will have to learn there are some things in life that even I cannot get her.”

Cassia’s stomach shriveled. If His Grace wasn’t willing to go through with the charade, he would send her on her way, and she would never have the chance to search his library.

Damn him and his morals.

He finally turned to face her. “I thank you for your efforts. Please join us for supper. I’ll have Mrs. Humphreys find you a room for the night.”

Cassia stood and walked to the door on stiff legs.

She wasn’t ready to give up, but she hadn’t counted on the strength of the duke’s convictions. She needed to rethink her strategy.

An idea crashed into her like a runaway carriage. She spun around. “Agree to woo her.”

“Excuse me?” The lift of his eyebrows was the only sign that he disapproved of her abrupt tone.

“Forgive me.” She rushed back across the room and dropped to one knee beside his desk. “Lenore mentioned that she has to go on a journey. Allow me to go with her. Let me tell her that you want me to woo her on your behalf.”

His eyebrows rose further.

“She’ll understand that you’re far too busy ruling the realm to woo every potential bride yourself, and that some sort of”—she struggled to find the right word—“vetting process must take place.”

“I don’t see how that will help, other than to delay things.”

“I won’t sing your praises, Your Grace. Instead, I’ll do the opposite. I’ll make you sound so unappealing that she’ll decide she’s better off keeping far away from you.”

“And how would that help get a llama for Felicity?”

A smile pulled at Cassia’s lips as her plan fell into place. “Because by the time I’m finished, she’ll be willing to trade a llama to make sure you *don’t* propose.”

The duke leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers.

“Surely a mild deception would be acceptable. I’ll ensure Mistress Lenore’s feelings are protected.”

His gaze softened. “It would make Felicity so happy.”

Cassia’s heart stuttered painfully as she waited for his decision.

“You have my permission to try. Keep track of your expenses. I’ll reimburse you. And if you succeed, I’ll give you the same price I offered Lenore: a thousand gold coins.”

Cassia let out a strangled croak. Lenore had turned down a thousand gold coins! It was almost too much money to contemplate. With all that gold, she could spend another ten years searching for her sister if she had to. She could bribe people for information, hire the best trackers to hunt through the woods, and buy whatever weapons or poisons or charms she need to kill the gingerbread witch.

Whatever happened with Lenore, Cassia would get a unicorn for Felicity, even if she had to steal one.

CASSIA WASN'T SURE WHAT she'd expected for supper. Probably a staid dining room, a long table with the duke seated at one end, and his daughter out of sight or on her best behavior. She certainly hadn't expected a garden party with a quartet of musicians playing lively tunes, His Grace regaling a collection of neighbors with humorous stories, and his daughter laughing and playing with a dozen other children.

Cassia put on her most charming smile, wove through the crowd with a drink in her hand, and made polite small talk with whichever guests met her gaze without looking down on her.

The main topic of conversation seemed to be the effect that a blockaded river was having on imports, but as Cassia knew little about trade routes, she didn't dare join in lest she made a fool of herself. When the food was set out on a long buffet table, she filled her plate and went to sit on an empty bench seat, half hidden under the boughs of an apple tree.

A heaviness grew in her chest with every breath. So much hung in the balance, so much required the web of lies that she'd woven to hold together, so much depended on everything falling into place.

Avalon might still be alive.

After all this time, her determination to hold on to her last flicker of hope might finally pay off.

If she could only find the gingerbread house again, she'd finally know for sure.

"Is this seat taken?" A young gentleman stepped out of the growing darkness and plopped down beside Cassia without waiting for an answer. Her gaze started at his polished boots, tracked up his dark gray trousers with twin rows of ornate buttons at the waist, and on over his soft white shirt and fitted waistcoat. His hair was pulled back in a ribbon at the nape of his neck, and when her gaze finally landed on his face, she gasped.

"Grayson?"

He gave her a self-deprecating smile. "I clean up good, huh?"

"I—what are you—forgive me. I didn't know that servants would—"

"No, you're right, we wouldn't," he said, and she was glad he'd cut her off because she was certain that whatever she'd managed to say would've sounded insulting. "His Grace is my brother. He likes to wheel me out for parties."

"Your brother? But he's so old. And you're a groom."

His lips twitched as he nodded. “His Grace is the second oldest of our siblings, and I’m ninth.”

“Ninth!” Cassia blurted out, the shock preventing her from being diplomatic. “Your parents had *nine* children?”

“Our mother was dux, and the story goes she kept having babies to keep Papa busy while she worked.” He settled back into the seat, picked up a chicken leg from his plate, and waved it absently. “They may have run out of titles by the time they got to me, but I don’t mind. I’d take horses over people any day. What about you?”

“Not overly fond of either, to be honest.” And for once, she *was* being honest.

He laughed around a mouthful of chicken. “No. Who are your people?”

“Oh.” She picked an imaginary piece of lint off her trousers as she considered whether to lie. She usually did. Told people what they wanted to hear, said whatever would make her fit in. But a quick calculation told her it wouldn’t matter if Grayson knew the truth and blabbed it to the duke; it wouldn’t contradict any lies she’d told. And anyway, she couldn’t say what Grayson wanted to hear because she didn’t *know* what he wanted to hear.

He was only being friendly to avoid the collection of nobles in the garden.

There was a high chance she would never see him again, and there was a *very* high chance that he didn’t care if he never saw *her* again.

“My parents were woodcutters. We lived—they still live—east of here, in Ravenglove Forest.”

“Siblings?”

Cassia stared at a flickering lamp hanging from a distant cherry tree. “I had a sister, but she was lost to the forest when we were ten.”

Grayson let out a curse, set his plate aside, and offered Cassia his hand. “Miss Cassia, would you dance with me?”

“What?” Cassia recoiled at his lack of tact after her revelation about Avalon. “Why?”

“To save me from Lady Eliza Pendleton.”

A young lady in an elegant evening gown was gliding across the lawn toward them. A look somewhere between resignation and desperation crouched in Grayson’s eyes.

“I don’t know any fancy, noble dances.” She assumed they would be quite different from the upbeat folk dances the peasants enjoyed at home.

“Can you follow a lead?”

“I suppose ...” She slipped her hand into his.

He let out a small sigh of relief before tucking Cassia’s hand into the crook of his elbow and escorting her to the dance floor. As they passed Lady Eliza Pendleton, she gave Cassia a pained look, as if she was appalled by Cassia’s humble appearance.

They weaved through the other dancers before turning to face each other. Grayson looked somewhat grim as he took one of Cassia’s hands in his and placed his other on her waist. As promised, he took the lead, and they fell in with the couples shuffling around the floor.

“When you said your sister was lost,” he said, barely loud enough to be heard over the music, “did you mean she died?”

Cassia misstepped, and his grip tightened until she regained her balance. “I didn’t think you’d heard me.”

“Sorry,” he said. “Sometimes, after spending all day with the horses, I forget my manners.”

With her focus split between reading the gentle pressure of his hands and not tripping over her own feet, Cassia had none left with which to lie.

“I don’t know if she’s dead. We got lost deep in the forest. I made it home but wasn’t able to lead anyone back to where I’d last seen her. It’s been ten years, and we never found a trace of her.” There. That wasn’t a lie at all. Only by omission.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, glancing away briefly. “I didn’t mean to raise such a sensitive subject.”

“You can make it up to me by telling me what foul fate made you run from Lady Eliza.”

“I didn’t run,” Grayson protested.

“You practically begged me to save you.”

He tried to avoid her gaze, but they were too close together and he couldn’t hide for long.

“Her parents want us to wed.”

Cassia tried to turn a surprised laugh into a sympathetic murmur.

“I’ve avoided an official betrothal so far,” he said, his voice flat, “but I don’t think I can hold out much longer.”

Cassia didn't have to fake her sympathy this time. She didn't know much, but she knew marriage shouldn't feel like a prison. Wincing at her own bluntness but searching for an out for him, she said, "Why would nobles want their daughter to marry a groom?"

Grayson cocked one eyebrow. "They wouldn't. But the duke's brother is another matter."

Cassia frowned as she worked through the logic. "So—what?—her parents want you two to marry because they think you can curry the duke's favor?"

He gave her an appreciative look. "For someone who clearly isn't part of this world, you catch on quick."

"And your parents approve the match because she has money and a title and it would be a strategic partnership?" Cassia guessed.

"My parents have no opinion either way." He cleared his throat before saying simply, "They're dead."

Cassia cursed herself for blundering into that. She was normally more careful with her words. "What does His Grace say?"

"He agrees she's an appropriate match. Her family has money, and land, and our politics align where it matters. The only thing that's saved me so far is that Felicity has been His Grace's sole focus since Maleena died. But I imagine he'll force my hand eventually."

"Do you *want* to marry her?" Cassia suspected the answer was no, since he'd done his best to avoid her.

"Lady Eliza is ... we've known each other a long time ..." His shoulder tensed under her hand and he stopped stumbling over his words. "We used to run around together like these children. And there was a time when I thought there was no one else I'd rather marry. But then everything changed." His brows pinched, and he shook his head. "If I can retreat to the stables between my other duties, I'll be happy enough." He glanced toward the manor house that towered at the edge of the garden. "Though I'll be loath to leave this place. I have a lot of good memories of summers spent here with my family."

Cassia wanted to protest that it was wrong to make him marry if he was against the idea, but then his response hinted at a complexity she wasn't entirely sure she understood.

Before she could say anything, Grayson gave her a wry smile. “On the other hand, a groom’s wage is plenty enough to live on if I decided to flee for a life in the woods.”

For some reason, the idea he would run away from his potential betrothed, go somewhere no one recognized him, and live his dream life as a groom filled her with a sense of hope that she hadn’t felt for a long time.

“You never know,” she said. “You might meet someone in the woods who fancies a groom over a duke’s brother.”

When the song ended, Grayson scanned the crowd before escorting Cassia back to the seat and the remains of her supper.

“I owe you,” he said. “If you ever need to be saved from an unwelcome admirer, let me know.”

This time, Cassia couldn’t make her laugh sound like anything other than what it was. “Thank you, but I don’t think that’s going to be a problem.”

LENORE SPENT THE TWO days of Cassia’s absence preparing for their journey. She sheared the remaining unicorns and packed their fleeces away to clean and prep for spinning later. The barn had a room at the back that was stacked with ten years’ worth of fleeces. If she finally got her spindles back, she would be able to turn them into something useful.

She checked over her wagon to ensure its roadworthiness, and summoned the local wheelwright to repair a divot in the right front wheel. But the most difficult task kept her up until the small hours.

She’d been lucky that when her spindles had been stolen, she’d had a good supply of spun yarn on hand. She’d been frugal with it, using the absolute minimum required to make a charm effective, and blending it with regular llama yarn to make the charms pretty enough to sell. Even so, she was down to her last ball of truthfulness and had run out of confidence completely.

She turned to her jewelry box, where her own collection of charms were housed in small compartments over three levels.

The middle layer contained the virtues. Along with truthfulness and confidence, there were a dozen others, including bravery, generosity, and wit.

Each compartment in the top layer contained a vice that represented a lack of the equivalent virtue: deceit, self doubt, cowardice, miserliness, and boorishness.

The bottom layer was for charms with a vice caused by a virtue's excess: boastfulness, vanity, rashness, extravagance, and buffoonery.

What she needed was a charm that would help Cassia find something that had evaded her for ten years. Unfortunately, luck wasn't a virtue. But she could make something close. Blending bravery with a hint of single-mindedness, confidence with a smidgen of impatience, and just enough boastfulness to counteract Cassia's bracelet.

She had enough left of the other yarns, but for confidence would have to sacrifice her charm. But if they were successful in finding her spindles, she would be able to spin as much confidence as she wanted.

She pulled on a pair of fine gloves (knitted from a blend of industriousness, conscientiousness, and wisdom) to protect herself from the effects of the charm before slipping it out of its compartment. The unicorn thread was knotted in the shape of a peacock, and she carefully snipped the ties holding it to the back plate. She found the final knot—the easiest part of the job, since she was the one who'd knotted it—dug the point of a jeweler's pick into the center and pulled the tail through. One down, only a hundred or so to go.

It was a painstaking process, but eventually she'd unknotted the brooch and was left with a string of kinked thread.

As much as she enjoyed spinning—not that she'd done any proper spinning for over a decade—it was crafting the thread into charms that really felt like magic. She never tried to bend the thread to her will, or to take on a predetermined shape. She picked one thread and started knotting, letting it flow left or right as it wanted, adding others in when she felt the urge, letting the form reveal itself.

She hummed as she worked, matching her tone to the song of the thread, making sure to harmonize as she wove the different varieties in. Soon, time lost all meaning, and Lenore became unaware of anything except the magic's song and the rhythmic motion of her fingers.

Then her hands fell still, knowing before conscious thought that the design was complete.

She blinked, and the cottage came into focus around her, the corners of the room lost to darkness, the candles burned low. Her shoulders ached from hunching over her work table, her eyes were gritty from concentrating, and her stomach was pinched with hunger. But her discomfort faded to nothing as she gazed upon the design.

It resembled a chimera with the head of a lion for bravery, the body of a hare for impatience, the six legs of an ant for single-mindedness, and the tail of a peacock for confidence. And in the middle of the body was a perfectly round hole about the size of her fingernail. *That* was peculiar, but she didn't bother to question it. And she certainly didn't have time to undo it and start again.

The remaining threads snapped off easily where the charm ended. Although what she'd told Cassia was true—unicorn thread was resistant to any blade except one made from unicorn horn—that rule only seemed only to apply once the thread had been turned into something like a twisted bracelet or a macramé brooch. Otherwise, the dormant thread always seemed to break exactly where she needed it to.

Lenore packed the leftover balls away, slipped off her gloves, and set the design on her naked palm. She could hear the harmony, and it was perfect. It was, in fact, the best work she'd ever done.

Because of the hole, she didn't set the charm on a solid backing, instead attaching a simple bar pin behind the lion head. Then she packed her tools away and collapsed into bed.

THE NEXT MORNING, LENORE was packing the wagon with supplies when Cassia walked up to the house. She was wearing a traveling cloak over a simple shift dress belted at the waist, and a pair of leggings. Her hair hung loose; the ashen outer strands stood out against the darker ones underneath, appearing almost silver in the overcast morning light.

She brought only one bag, and Lenore packed it into the back of the wagon with the rest. Then she hitched Custard and another unicorn named Trifle to the wagon, and they set off.

The unicorns kept a steady pace, and the wagon grumbled and groaned over the hard-packed dirt road. Cassia was quiet beside her, shifting constantly in her seat, as if she couldn't get comfortable.

Eventually she said, “You haven’t told me how we are to find the gingerbread house when I couldn’t manage the task for ten years.”

After the incident with the boastfulness charm, Lenore had wanted to hold this new one back, in case Cassia recoiled. But she supposed now was as good a time as any. She dug her hand in her pocket and held out the brooch. “This is for you.”

Cassia stared without moving to take it. “What does it do?”

“It’s a combination of bravery, confidence, impatience, single-mindedness, and truth.” When Cassia still didn’t move, Lenore continued, “You see, vices aren’t always bad. Impatience can make you act. Single-mindedness hones your focus. It’s all about balance.” She paused to gauge Cassia’s interest. “Bravery to face the witch. Confidence to make you believe you can find the gingerbread house despite searching for ten years. And truth to counteract that charm on your wrist. Alone they have power, but together, they are more than the sum of their parts. Together, they can make things happen that you wouldn’t dream of.”

“Is that the magic of the spindles? Virtues and vices?”

Lenore nodded.

Cassia’s fingers twitched then she reached out and took the charm. She lifted it to her eye and peered through the hole. Lenore’s breath caught. She never would have thought of trying that. But, of course. Look through the charm to see the truth.

Cassia gasped with wonder. “The unicorns! They’re shining!” She lowered the charm then raised it to her eye again. “Amazing.” She held the charm out, and Lenore took it reluctantly, dropping it back in her pocket. Cassia clamped her hands between her knees. “Why did you join the Order?”

Lenore adjusted her grip on the reins. “My great great grandmother was a spinner in the faraway land I told you about. She and my great great grandfather fled with three young children and settled here. She was, by all accounts, a fine spinner, making all sorts of delicate threads. But she hated spinning after that. She was afraid that King Hendrick would hunt her down if she spun, that she would somehow be accused of causing the prince’s fate. But it was her trade, her only way to support her family. She did it not because she wanted to, but because she had to.”

Lenore shook her head. Though she'd never met her great great grandmother, the injustice of it still pained her. "Her stoicism came to define our family. When my mentor chose me as her apprentice, she came to ask my parents for permission to take me away. My mother hesitated because although spinning was the most prestigious occupation she could imagine, she too carried the hurt passed down through the generations. But when Faye offered a payment akin to a dowry to compensate for the fact I wouldn't be allowed to marry, it brought my mother around."

"Didn't you get any say in the matter?"

Lenore shrugged. "I wasn't opposed. I was sixteen and the idea of getting married was far less appealing than the chance to show I could be as stoic as my grandmother. The dowry would help to support my family in my absence, and I would learn a trade that would allow me to continue to support them, and not marrying or having children would mean I had plenty of coins to spare."

"That's a lot to ask of someone so young."

"I was young, but I knew it was the right thing to do. I took my vow and joined the Order knowing what I was getting in to."

"But why? Why swear off marriage? Why not have children?"

"Because there are so few of us. There is only ever a short overlap between a mentor and her apprentice. If I had a husband, I might find I'd rather spend time cuddling with him instead of practicing my craft. If I had children, I might rather teach them their letters than pass on my knowledge to an apprentice."

"That's ridiculous," Cassia muttered. "Why can't you do both?"

"I didn't have to choose this life," Lenore said quietly. "But choose it I did, and I won't break the vows that I've made."

Not again.

Cassia's mouth twisted in irritation. "You're as bad as Grayson."

"Who's Grayson?"

"The duke's groom. Only he isn't just a groom. He's the duke's brother. His Grace likes to parade him around to show how wonderful he was to give his brother a place to live and a job on his staff, but His Grace wants him to marry some hoity-toity lady, and Grayson seems rather resigned to doing that out of some strange sense of duty, when all he really wants is to spend time with the horses."

“That poor boy,” Lenore murmured. “He shouldn’t marry someone if he doesn’t want to.”

“Apparently, it’s a thing that nobles do. They seem to have a different set of rules to the rest of us.”

“That doesn’t mean he has to obey them.”

Cassia gave her a flat look. “Is denial a vice you spin often?”

Denial wasn’t a vice.

But deprivation was an excess of temperance.

Lenore had never considered that she might have an oversupply.

IT WOULD TAKE TWO days traveling at normal llama pace to reach Ravenglove Forest. The unicorns could go a lot faster for a lot longer, but that sort of speed attracted the wrong sort of attention. In the late afternoon of the first day, they came across a caravan of travelers who had set up camp on a small green carved out of the woods on one side of the road.

The large collection of wagons, carts, and carriages was arranged in two semicircles. Lenore parked beside the food carts, where the stallholders called jovially to each other as they made their preparations for supper.

Already Lenore could catch the scent of potatoes baking, sausages frying, and venison roasting.

She lowered the feet that would keep the wagon stable overnight, unhitched the unicorns, secured them with long ropes to allow them to wander, and laid out buckets of water and feed that consisted of oats, dandelions, and dried rabbit. She folded down the side of the wagon and laid out the balls of yarn, pairs of gloves, and decorative belts she’d made from regular llama fiber. Finally she sat in a wooden folding chair beside the wagon and continued to work on her latest knitting project: a warm hat with earflaps.

Over the years, she’d found people were more willing to browse her wares if she didn’t look like she would pounce on them and push for a sale the moment they came close.

She sold a few pieces and gave a grandmother some tips on how to fix the neckline of a vest she’d knitted for her grandson.

As the sun set and lanterns were lit around the green, Lenore packed her wares away and followed her nose to a cart where she bought a flatbread

filled with succulent venison, crisp vegetables, and a spicy sauce. She found Cassia at a simple wooden table in the middle of the green, picking at a plate piled high with slices of fried potato slathered with gravy and melted cheese. She was sliding one of the slices through the gravy as if she were trying to mop up spilled water.

“Not hungry?” Lenore asked.

Cassia flinched, her expression lost for a moment before she slipped on a mask of cheerfulness. “It turns out I may have overestimated my appetite.”

Lenore kept her voice gentle. “It’s understandable if you’re scared. If someone asked me to confront the witch who’d held me captive, I wouldn’t rush to take them up on it.”

“I’m not scared of that witch.” Cassia’s voice overflowed with a confidence that Lenore didn’t believe. “I’m not ten summers old any longer. I hope we find her. I have a debt to repay.”

“If you’re worried about your sister’s fate, that’s understandable too.” Lenore reached into her pocket and offered the chimera charm to Cassia again.

As she stared at the charm, Cassia’s fingers tightened, and soft, fluffy potato squeezed out between them. “I don’t need that yet. I can find my way home.”

“If you’re unsure of the welcome you’ll receive from your parents—”

Cassia’s gaze flicked up. “We don’t need to go there. We don’t need to see them.”

Lenore slid her hand further across the table. “This will help you face what you need to face.”

Cassia eased back, fidgeting with her bracelet. Her smile returned. “The only thing I’m worried about is whether we’ll be able to find the gingerbread house. If that charm does what you say it will, then we won’t have a problem. But I’d hate to risk using up all its potency *now* when we’re taking a path I already know.”

Lenore sighed at Cassia’s refusal and slipped the charm back into her pocket. “That’s not how ...” She trailed off as she felt the weight of the silence that had fallen over the clearing.

There were no calls from birds settling down for the night, no cries from nocturnal creatures waking up, and not a peep from the people close by, as if everyone in the camp had inhaled together and now held their breath.

“Something’s coming,” Cassia murmured.

Their gazes locked, and Lenore echoed her words, confirming what they both knew. “Something. Is. Coming.”

Chaos broke out around them. Parents grabbed children. Stallholders abandoned their cleaning. Everyone rushed to hitch their horses or llamas and prep the wagons for departure.

Lenore scrambled to her feet, discarding the last of her flatbread.

A distant rustling of tree leaves and creak of branches grew to a deep rumble. The ground shook beneath their feet. Cassia’s hand clamped onto Lenore’s wrist.

“What is it?” Cassia called to a young mother who sprinted past with a baby in her arms. “What’s going on?”

“The tree hunt,” the woman cried, without pausing her stride. “The tree hunt comes.”

Lenore turned to Cassia, but the young woman looked as confused as Lenore felt.

“It can’t be good.” Cassia’s eyes darted left and right. “Everyone’s fleeing.”

“Then it’s time we joined them.”

They ran together across the green, holding hands tightly to keep their balance, dodging the carts that were already racing for the road. When they reached their wagon, Lenore’s fingers shook as she tried to untie the rope from Custard’s bridle. She wished she had her bravery charm, but there was no time to grab it from inside the wagon.

Cassia muttered a curse as she tried to free Trifle. The unicorn had stretched her rope taut in an attempt to reach a particular clump of grass and hadn’t seemed to notice the tension in the air.

Lenore yanked her rope free with a triumphant, “Ha!” at the same time as the first of the tree hunt broke into the clearing, and she knew they’d run out of time.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE TREES WERE WALKING.

Lenore lost her grip on Custard's bridle. Her jaw fell slack. Her stomach dropped to her knees then bounced back up into her throat.

First one tree then another and another stepped out of the forest. Towering pines, gnarled oaks, slender aspen.

Lenore screwed her eyes shut, but when she opened them the trees were still walking.

They weren't normal trees. Their trunks split into legs, low branches hung like arms, and high on each trunk was a collection of knots that formed a face.

"Come on!" Cassia yelled. She was dragging Trifle toward the front of the wagon. The unicorn was pulling against her, her tongue sticking out as if she was still reaching for that one clump of grass.

Lenore turned to help, growling at Trifle in her most serious *I've had enough of your nonsense* tone, and together they were able to maneuver the animal into place.

A cry drew Lenore's attention. One horse-drawn cart remained in the middle of the green. In their haste, the occupants hadn't fully raised the feet, and the back one had snagged, raising the wheel off the ground. A young man was pulling the horse from the front, a young woman was pushing from the back, and an older woman was trying to coax three small, scared children from the bed.

Lenore's heart stuttered, her pulse erratic in her ears. "Hitch the unicorns and get the wagon out of here," she yelled at Cassia.

But before she could take a step toward the stuck family, Cassia caught her arm, said, "I don't know what I'm doing. You'll be faster," and took off at a run.

Lenore cursed at the young woman's impetuosity, but she also knew that she was right. She grabbed Custard and guided her into place beside Trifle.

More treefolk poured onto the green as she worked, and then the hunters appeared, though they were more herding than hunting.

They were giants. Small compared to the trees, but at least three times Lenore's height. Their trousers were made from a patchwork of hides, and their shirts sewed from swathes of checked material. They all had long beards braided in an assortment of styles, and each carried either an axe, a serrated sword, or both. They whooped and hollered as they urged the treefolk on.

Lenore finally got Custard hitched. She remembered to lift the feet of the wagon before scrambling up onto the seat. As she hauled on the reins to get the unicorns to turn, one of the giants caught her eye. His bearded cheeks puffed up in a smile; he raised his axe in a salute and called out what seemed to be a cheery greeting in a language she couldn't comprehend. Lenore gave him a tight nod and flicked the reins to urge the unicorns on.

When they reached the road, she pulled them up short and turned to look back.

The stalled cart was moving again, and the man driving it fought to dodge the passing treefolk, but one long leg caught the underside of the cart and flipped it over. The horse let out a panicked cry as it tumbled to the ground, which was echoed by the man as he attempted to jump clear. The treefolk's foot came down on the overturned cart, crushing it into the dirt.

Lenore clamped her hand to her mouth.

The cart was empty. She was sure it was empty. It *had* to be empty.

The man scrambled over to his horse, grabbed a knife from his belt, and cut the animal free. It clambered to its feet, and he slapped it on its rump to get it moving. But he didn't follow its panicked run to the road, he turned back the way he'd come.

The treefolk slowed their steady walk, and the green was soon filled with their swaying, creaking, groaning bodies. They reached their arms into the air, buried their feet into the earth, and settled in for the night.

Silence fell over what was now dense forest, only distinguishable from the woods around it by the variety of trees.

Lenore gripped the reins until her knuckles throbbed, peering between the thick trunks. The young man came out first, carrying one child in each arm, picking his way carefully. Then the young woman appeared, leading the third child by the hand.

Lenore didn't want to go into that new patch of forest. She dreaded the thought of coming across a broken body. But if Cassia was hurt, it was Lenore's fault. If she needed help, Lenore couldn't turn away.

She barked a sharp, "Stay put," to the unicorns, leapt down from the wagon, grabbed the only weapons she had, and ran toward the trees.

CASSIA STOOD IN WHAT was left of the clearing, surrounded by the newly planted trees. She tightened her grip around the shoulders of the older woman who'd been with the cart. Her name was Patrice, which Cassia had learned when the trees had stopped moving and they'd realized they were both still alive. She hoped the woman's family had made it out.

The three giants encircled them, one carrying a large axe that looked more suited for battle than chopping down trees. He dropped to his knee in front of her. When he spoke, the words sounded like they'd been crushed between his teeth on the way out of his mouth.

"Well, isn't this a welcome surprise."

"Surprise?" Cassia squeaked. She certainly *was* surprised. As a child she'd heard stories of giants living in the mountains to the west, but no one she knew had ever been fool enough to go looking for them. And now here they were, less than a day's walk from her childhood home.

"Never thought we'd see you again."

"See me again?" Echoing the giant's words didn't help bring them any clarity.

"You owe me a debt."

"Excuse me?" Cassia's confusion was slowly giving way to anger. Which, she supposed, was better than fear. "What debt?"

The giant twisted one of his beard braids around his fingers. "You snipped a hair from my beard, and since there's no way to replace it, I demand fair payment."

Cassia planted her free hand on her hip. "Now look here, Sir Giant—"

“Ooo,” he said, turning to his companions. “Would you listen to that. *Sir Giant*.”

“If I knew your name, I’d call you that, but I don’t.”

“Don’t know my name?” he sneered. “In that case, let me introduce myself. I’m Sir Twinkletoes Lightfoot, that’s Mr. Prickleberry Cuppatea, and she’s Queen Esmeralda of Caveline.”

If the ridiculousness of the names hadn’t told Cassia they were fake, the guffaw from the giant to her left would have.

Well. If he wanted to play a game of lies, he was about to face a champion.

“Nice to meet you, Sir Lightfart,” she said, giving him her biggest, fakest smile. “I’m Cassia Sawyer, and as much as I’d love to stand here debating some imaginary debt with you, I need to return to my mistress, the Witch of Grayson Grove, before she burns her way through this forest searching for me.”

Something in her speech made the giant hesitate. Cassia gave Patrice a nudge and they speed-walked toward the trees.

The giant’s disproportionately large hand slammed to the ground in front of them, blocking their way. “I don’t care what you’re calling yourself now or who your mistress is.” His massive head hovered over them, and his breath battered them like a hurricane. “But you and the rogue wronged me, you stole something from me, you besmirched my honor, and since you’re here and he’s not, you’re the one who gets to make it right.”

Cassia set her jaw. Whoever had hurt this giant—and though she was trying not to let her heart get too focused on the prospect, she’d started to suspect it may have been someone who looked a lot like her—it seemed that she would have to be the one to mollify him. It wasn’t her fault, but the giant was making it her problem, and if she wanted to get out of this and on with her quest, she would have to do her best to fix it.

“This isn’t an admission of guilt,” she said, “but what sort of retribution would you require?”

“My beard has been sullied,” he said. “The stolen hair needs to be replaced by something of greater value.”

“*Greater value?*”

“To compensate for his hurt feelings,” the giant to Cassia’s left explained.

Cassia suppressed a sigh. It seemed slightly ridiculous when a plucked hair would only regrow, but the way of giants clearly wasn't the same as that of humans, and since he was the one who'd been wronged, it was right to abide by his rules.

"This still isn't an admission of guilt," she said, "but I'll attempt to make recompense if you let this woman go. She has nothing to do with this."

"That's right," Patrice said, giving Cassia an apologetic look. "We only just met."

The giant considered it for a moment, said, "That's fair," and moved his hand.

Patrice gave Cassia a tight hug, whispered, "Thank you, and good luck," and retreated between the trees.

Cassia settled herself cross-legged on the grass. "Right, Sir Lightfart, since you're the wronged party, why don't you make the opening offer."

The giant sat down in front of her, mimicking her pose. "I suppose a nice sparkly jewel would suffice."

Cassia could spend her entire life working for a decent wage and still not be able to afford a jewel large enough to decorate a giant's beard. "How about I brush out your beard and rebraid it in the Graceful Heart, a style forbidden to all but the royal line of North Lynnborough. I was lucky enough to learn when I was sent to the Lynnbrovian court on an errand for my mistress."

The giant shook his head. "As much as I appreciate a fancy style, it won't replace the missing strand."

"What about weaving in the bones of your enemies?" The giant who was definitely not the Queen of Caveline settled down on the grass beside them.

"Tempting," Sir Lightfoot said, "but unless you thoroughly bleach them, they always smell. And who has the time?"

The third giant, Mr. Cuppatea, sat on their other side. He reached toward Cassia, and she fought not to flinch away as he delicately pinched a fingerful of her hair and slowly let it cascade back down. "Bet you could do something nice with that."

"My hair?" Cassia gasped.

The other two giants leaned in for a better look.

"It is a pretty blend of colors," the not queen said.

Cassia's hand went to her head instinctively. She'd never considered herself especially vain, but she knew what worked for her, and the idea of cutting her hair off and wandering around like a shorn llama while it regrew brought a bitter taste to her mouth. "Oh, you don't want *my* hair," she said. "It's ragged with split ends, dry as an abandoned well, and"—she scratched viciously at her scalp—"absolutely inundated with fleas."

"I like it," Sir Lightfoot said. "Your fleas can make friends with mine."

"No, I really must insist." Cassia's mouth kept moving, her brain scrambling to keep up as an idea emerged from the swamp of her thoughts like some mythical beast. "I cannot sully your beard further by weaving these repugnant locks in." She lifted up a handful of her hair, pulled a disgusted face, and dropped it again. "What if you realize you've been shortchanged and hunt me down to demand further payment? But if it would please you, I have something that might work instead. My mistress has in her possession a thread of shining silver, spun from the fleece of the rarest of magical creatures: a three-headed unicorn—"

"Wouldn't that make it a tricorn?" the not queen said with a snort.

"Indeed," Cassia said. "But they are so rare that they do not even have a name of their own." She clambered to her feet. "With this thread woven in, your beard would gleam in the moonlight, glitter in the sunlight, and glow in the rays from every shooting star. No one would doubt the sanctity of your beard ever again."

She held her breath as the giant considered it.

"I accept your offer."

"Excellent." Cassia smiled as she strode toward the trees. "I'll return to my mistress's wagon to get the thread right now, so we can get started."

"No." The giant's hand thudded to the ground again, his fingers curling around as he herded Cassia back toward them.

"What do you mean by no?"

"If I let you go, I don't trust you'll return to fulfill our bargain."

Cassia struggled to maintain her smile, because that had been her exact plan. She'd fully intended to flee as soon as she made it back to Lenore's wagon. "But how am I to get the thread if I can't go to my mistress?"

"Don't you have some magical way to contact her?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Then you'll have to hope she comes looking for you."

“She doesn’t have to hope.” Lenore’s voice made Cassia peer around the giant’s fingers. The Spinster stepped out from between two trees and strode toward them.

Cassia wanted to sob with relief. Or run to give her a hug. But she stayed where she was, trying to figure out how quickly her lies would unravel and what the giants would do when they found out that Lenore wasn’t *really* a witch and that she didn’t have enough unicorn thread on hand to decorate a human’s beard, let alone a giant’s one.

Lenore stopped beside her, raised her chin, set her hands on her hips, and said, “The Witch of Grayson Grove doesn’t abandon her people to their fate.”

LENORE WAS DEFINITELY GOING to have to talk to Cassia about the effects of her bracelet. Lying to someone when they asked how you were and you knew they weren’t interested in hearing about all your aches and pains was one thing. Lying to a trio of giants who could squeeze you so hard that all your insides came out was something else entirely.

She was grateful that she’d encountered the old woman from the cart on her way into the wood, and that the woman had alerted her to the ridiculous title Cassia had given her. She supposed, in this case, maintaining the lie was better than the alternative.

“Your servant has promised me some of your silver thread,” the middle giant said.

“Of course,” Lenore said. “What she has promised, I will deliver.” She opened the bag slung over her shoulder and rifled through it, careful to keep the contents hidden. “I have depravity, melancholy, foolishness, boorishness ... Which do you fancy?”

“I fancy none of those,” the giant said, his expression appalled.

“I understand,” Lenore said. “I also have shyness, greed, blind obedience —”

“What trickery is this?” the giant demanded. “I was promised thread.”

“And you shall have it. You merely have to choose your flavor.”

The giant’s expression darkened as he turned his gaze on Cassia. “I am no longer satisfied with our deal. I will not sully my beard further with these vices.”

“Then maybe I could offer you a virtue instead,” Lenore said casually. “Unfortunately, I’ve run out of thread, but I do have these lovely brooches that would make beautiful adornments to your beard. Generosity. Confidence. Wit.” When the giant hesitated, Lenore sweetened the deal. “Maybe one for each braid ... ”

The giant stroked his beard all the way to the end. “What are the options?”

Lenore listed them as she showed him each one. In the end he chose wit (the brooch shaped like a frog) and righteous indignation (a shield). She and Cassia each attached one to the knots at the end of the giant’s braids, and he proudly showed them off to his companions. They both complimented him before he turned to Cassia.

“Our business is complete.”

“Thank you, Sir Lightfoot,” she replied.

“Stuart,” he said. “And this is Henry and Alice.”

“Nice to meet you ... again.” She moistened her lips before asking, “Would you please remind me when it was that we met?”

“Not a week ago,” Stuart said, frowning. “Did you hit your head when you fell?”

Cassia winced. “Must have. And you said I was with a rogue?”

Stuart nodded. “Young fellow, about your age, dressed all in black. Both of you swift on your feet.”

“Smooth talker, too.” Alice gave her eyebrows a cheeky bounce and twirled one of her own beard braids. “Not often we meet a human who can speak our language.”

“You can give him this back, next time you see him.” Stuart plucked something small from his beard and tossed it to Cassia, who caught it against her chest. “I don’t need his silver tainting my beard.”

“Thank you,” Cassia murmured again, her brows dipping. “I will, if I ever see him again.”

Lenore didn’t know what thoughts were swirling in the young woman’s head, but she knew that it was time they took their leave. They bid farewell to the giants, who let them leave in peace, and picked their way through the darkness between the trees and back to the road without too much trouble.

Relief filled Lenore’s chest as they climbed onto the seat of the wagon, and the unicorns broke into a fast walk. They had excellent night vision,

and the lanterns on the front of the wagon cast small pools of light, but Lenore didn't want to travel too far in the dark in case they come across a fallen log or pot hole with too little warning to stop. But putting some distance between them and the giants seemed like a good idea.

Cassia sat beside her, elbows resting on her knees, as if she were weighed down by a milkmaid's yoke across her shoulders. She held up a shiny silver ring—the token the giant had torn from his beard—so it caught the lamplight, then slid it onto her little finger and twisted it absently.

As the unicorns plodded on, Lenore looped the reins through a notch in the foot rest, reached behind the seat to retrieve a blanket, and draped it over Cassia's shoulders.

"I'm sorry," the young woman murmured. "I didn't mean for you to have to sacrifice your charms. I thought I could talk my way out of it."

"Well, it does seem like you're better at spinning yarns than I am."

Cassia let out a faint laugh at Lenore's attempt at levity. She filled in what Lenore had missed of the giant's accusation then continued, "A week ago I was in Grenham, I've never associated with any rogues, and I'd certainly remember if I'd stolen a hair from a giant's beard."

"But he was certain he recognized you?"

Cassia scrubbed at her face before giving Lenore an intent look. "Maybe he wasn't wrong. Maybe he met someone who looked *exactly* like me."

"Your sister?"

"Avalon and I are twins. Identical to the last freckle. If not me then it must've been her." She closed her eyes and inhaled a shuddering breath. "After all this time, I might finally find her alive."

Lenore didn't want Cassia's hopes to rise only to be crushed by disappointment if they didn't find her sister, but she had to admit the possibility that the giant had mistaken her for her twin didn't seem too far-fetched.

In an attempt to relieve her of her burden for a short time, Lenore said, "Tell me more about Grayson. Does he perchance own a grove that's in need of a witch? If so, I shall prepare my résumé."

Cassia gave a halfhearted shrug. "I only just met him, but I don't imagine he has any need of a witch."

A twinge of doubt made Lenore's eyebrows dip. "How long have you been in the duke's service?"

Cassia snapped upright. “Oh, a year, but Grayson spends most of his time in the stables. We’ve never crossed paths before.”

“But you said the duke likes to put him on show.”

“I did,” Cassia said, her eyes widening briefly. “And he does. But a humble servant such as myself doesn’t often make the guest list.”

“Then how did you finally meet?”

“Oh, it’s an interesting story,” Cassia said, warming up to the telling. “You see, I had to speak to the duke to seek permission to accompany you on this journey, of course, and he was hosting a garden party for the neighbors, and Grayson was there, and ...” A frown crossed her features. “I’m not sure why he spoke to me, to be honest, maybe because I *wasn’t* a noble. He’s not quite one of them, but he isn’t merely a servant either.”

As the story unfolded, it all sounded reasonable, but Lenore suspected that the bit about Grayson not quite fitting in as either a noble or a servant was the only truly honest part of Cassia’s tale.

They stopped at the side of the road, slept on the narrow cots on either side of the wagon, and set off again early the next morning. It was lunch time when they reached the hamlet on the edge of Ravenglove Forest.

It was little more than a collection of houses, a sawmill, and the school that Cassia had attended as a child. They parked the wagon in the small green in the center of the houses, beside the shared well and water pump. Lenore set out her wares as she had the night before, though it was such a small settlement, with the people going about their days, that she knew she’d be lucky to sell even one piece.

Cassia glanced around, a lost look on her face. “I only left a couple of years ago ... but it all seems so *small*.”

“That’s the nature of things,” Lenore said, settling down with her knitting. “There’s some dried meat and cheese in the wagon if you want some lunch. I’m afraid we won’t find any street vendors here.”

Cassia set her shoulders and shook the lost expression from her face. “No, we won’t, but I think we can do better.” She reached over, plucked the knitting from Lenore’s hands, shoved it back into the side compartment of the wagon with everything else, and snapped it shut.

Lenore let out a squawk of protest but didn’t fight when Cassia grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet.

“Come on.”

They took a route around the green to the side of the sawmill, where Cassia made them wait, half hidden.

“What are we—” Lenore began, but Cassia shushed her.

A few minutes later, a bell clanged loudly above the school house, and the hamlet came to life. Children swarmed out onto the green, yelling and laughing. Some plopped onto the grass and opened their lunch sacks to reveal a slice of bread, or an apple, or strips of smoked sausage. Others scattered toward the houses, where doors and arms were flung wide to greet them. The sawmill doors rattled open next, and the mill workers headed out to join their families for lunch.

Now that all the doors were open, the scent of sawdust mixed with the tantalizing aroma of soups, stews, and fresh bread.

Cassia dragged Lenore forward, angling so they crossed paths with a broad-shouldered, gray-haired woman who’d come out of the mill.

“Oh, I beg your pardon,” Cassia said, when they bumped shoulders.

The woman glanced at her in irritation before her expression softened. “Well, hogweed and hemlock, if it isn’t Miss Cassia Sawyer. What are you doing here?”

“Stopping in to visit my parents.”

The woman’s gaze raked over Cassia, as if attempting to gauge her success or failure based on her clothes. “What have you been up to all this time?”

“Oh, I can’t wait to tell you, but it’s a miracle I’m here to tell you anything at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well ...” Cassia’s face began to glow in a way Lenore was learning meant she was about to launch into an incredible story which would only bear a passing resemblance to reality. “We were on our way here when we stopped last night at a small encampment ...”

The pace of Cassia’s storytelling was superbly timed. She reached the part where the ground started to shake at the same moment they arrived at the woman’s front door. She lingered on the doorstep, torn between hearing more and going inside for her midday meal.

Cassia’s enthusiasm waned. “Don’t let us keep you from your lunch,” she said. “I’ll tell you the rest tomorrow.” Her face fell. “Oh, except, we

can't stay. I've only got tonight with my parents, and then we're back on the road. Long journey ahead, you see."

Cassia turned back to the green and nudged Lenore ahead of her. Lenore couldn't understand why she wouldn't tell the rest of the story, wouldn't ask the woman if she even wanted to hear it.

"Why don't you join me for lunch," the woman called. "I have enough to share."

A satisfied smile flitted across Cassia's lips. She turned back to the woman. "We wouldn't want to impose. We've got some cheese in the wagon. It's gone a bit dry, but we mustn't complain."

"Don't be ridiculous," the woman said, beckoning them in. "I insist."

"If you're sure ..." Cassia still didn't move.

"Absolutely."

Finally, Cassia strode forward again. "In that case, I shall repay your kindness and generosity with the most marvelous tale of bravery, sacrifice, and almost certain death."

The woman, who Cassia introduced as Miriam, served them each a bowl of stew that must've been simmering on her stove all morning. It was a heavier meal than Lenore liked in the middle of the day, but with fresh bread to go with it, it was definitely better than the dry cheese waiting in the wagon.

Between mouthfuls, Cassia told the story of their encounter with the giants in glorious detail. She dragged it out spectacularly, so an event which had taken under an hour to unfold took almost as long in the telling. She embellished outrageously. The treefolk weren't wandering aimlessly but deliberately aiming for the carts. There were a dozen giants, striking with double-handed axes or maces with spikes as long as a human was tall. The giant grasped her in his hand and threatened to squeeze until she popped like a grape unless she yielded to his demands. Lenore had to sacrifice the brooches that had been passed down through her family for generations. Then the giant had reneged on their deal, and they had barely escaped with their lives.

To keep from laughing at the ridiculousness of it all, Lenore filled her mind with the woes of the world: fledglings fallen from the nest, lambs separated from the flock by hungry wolves, young nobles forced into

loveless marriages, witches threatening to eat children, a woman who made a solemn vow because it was the right thing to do.

Not that the last one compared to the others.

She had made her vow willingly, knowing the consequences. And she had a good life.

Miriam oohed and aahed and gasped in all the right places. And when Cassia was finished, the mill worker wiped away a tear. She reached across the table to squeeze Lenore's hand. "Thank you for saving our Cassia." She sent the young woman a tender look. "She may have left to seek her fortune, but she'll always be a child of Ravenglove Forest. And it does my heart good to know she has a friend such as you looking out for her."

Lenore squeezed back and murmured her agreement, but she'd never thought she and Cassia might be friends. They were working toward a common goal, and she certainly enjoyed the young woman's company, but she also knew that a maelstrom of lies swirled around Cassia, and that wasn't a good foundation to build a friendship upon.

If only Cassia could let the bracelet go.

AFTER THEIR LUNCH, CASSIA and Lenore headed back to the wagon.

The world always felt better when Cassia had a full stomach, and now was no exception. The warm food had even had a soporific effect on her nerves.

"I have to apologize," Lenore said. "I know you said you don't need to visit your parents, but we have time."

Cassia continued walking and said nothing.

"We could go now," Lenore offered, "before we seek the gingerbread house."

"I'd rather find my sister first," Cassia demurred, as she settled herself into the seat of the wagon.

"After that, then?"

"I'll go home when Avalon comes with me." She gave Lenore a tight smile. After all, as far as Lenore knew, she was being kind and generous. She had no idea, because Cassia hadn't told her, of exactly how unwelcoming Cassia's childhood home was.

And if Avalon was alive, was she even at the gingerbread house? Where had the giant seen her a week ago? She should've asked.

Lenore flicked the reins to get the unicorns moving and said nothing more. Cassia pointed out the path behind the school house, and though she remembered it as a narrow track through the trees, it was now wide enough for the wagon to fit comfortably. As the canopy closed over them, Cassia felt gloom descend upon her.

She had trodden this path so many times, only to be turned around, turned back, turned away. Why did she think this time would be any different?

Her gaze drifted to Lenore, and the answer became clear. Because she wasn't alone.

Her gloom decayed into guilt.

She'd approached Lenore for one reason only: to obtain a unicorn for the duke. But since it had been clear that Lenore had no interest in selling one of the animals, Cassia had changed tack by making up the fanciful story that the duke wanted to woo her. She'd thought, at worst, it would buy her time. At best, Lenore would've been desperate enough to be wooed that Cassia could've convinced her to give the duke a unicorn as a gift. Then she merely would've had to explain that the duke had many prospects to choose from and she hadn't made the cut.

It would've been messy, especially if Lenore had ever approached the duke to demand her unicorn back, but by then Cassia would have done what she'd come for—gained access to the duke's library—and fled.

She'd been saved from that, but she'd found herself in a different sort of mess.

She hadn't expected Lenore to be such a staunchly independent woman. She certainly hadn't expected to respect her quite as much as she did. And she definitely hadn't imagined that she would find the one person who might be able to help her in her quest.

Maybe—hopefully—if they found the gingerbread house, and Avalon alive and well inside, Cassia would be able to unweave her lies. She could tell Lenore the duke accepted her refusal to be wooed, and she would be none the wiser. And she could simply inform the duke she'd failed to procure a unicorn and be on her way.

And she and Avalon could ... well, she'd never thought that far ahead. She certainly didn't want to return home. She'd left when she was eighteen, when she was confident she could scrape a living for herself. There would be some triumph in returning to her parents, proving they were wrong not to believe her about the witch, not to continue searching for Avalon, not to question her story about Avalon eating poisonous berries.

"My parents didn't believe me about the gingerbread house." She stared straight up the path but felt Lenore turn her way. "You said my bracelet makes me lie, and I'm not denying that, but my parents were the whetstone on which I honed my talent. When I told the truth, they didn't believe me. When I told them what they wanted to hear, it made them happy. I learned to pretend my tears were from joy, I was full when I was hungry, I didn't grieve for Avalon, and I had dreams no bigger than being a woodcutter in a tiny hamlet. The day I left, I told them I was going to the hamlet to trade eggs for cheese and I would be back in time for lunch. They didn't seem to notice I had a bag of clothes with me instead of a basket of eggs."

"I'm sorry they treated you that way."

Cassia shook off her malaise and plastered a smile on her face. "There would be some satisfaction in returning home and proving I was right, but I'm not sure I care enough to bother."

That was perhaps the largest lie she'd ever told.

"Now," she continued, "before we get turned around and end up back at the school house, I think it's time I used that brooch."

Lenore slipped the charm out of her pocket, and Cassia closed one eye and peered through the hole with the other. The unicorns glittered and shimmered in front of her. But the path was just a path, and the trees were just trees.

"Anything?" Lenore asked.

"Not yet."

"Why don't you tell me more about your experience with the witch," Lenore suggested. "So I'll be prepared."

It might've been wiser for Lenore to ask that before she'd agreed to come, but Cassia did her best to collect her thoughts.

"As I told you before, she was old when we met her. Bent and wrinkled and gray. She mistook us for her granddaughters—or pretended to—and invited us in and fed us. But there must've been a potion in the food,

because it sent us into a deep slumber, and when we awoke, she'd bound our ankles with what I now know was a chain made unicorn thread. Like the bracelet on my wrist, there was no knot or lock, and we couldn't get free. And the chain would grow and shrink as it needed to. And sometimes she would hold it and other times it would stick in midair where she left it. And when she wanted to, she could summon it to her hand."

"Did she use some sort of incantation or gesticulation?"

Cassia shrugged. "She would reach for the chain, and it would fly to her."

Lenore murmured, "Hrm." It wasn't a good sound.

"The cottage itself was magical. The kitchen produced meals, dishes would wash themselves, and then there's the fact it was made of gingerbread."

"Real gingerbread?"

"It withstood the elements but was still fresh enough to eat. I should know, I had to eat my way out."

"That ..." Lenore paused. "I want to say that isn't possible, but it clearly is. I may be a Spinster, but what I do is one very specific type of magic, and it in no way makes me an expert on witches. But, Cassia, that is far beyond anything I know."

Cassia lowered the charm to look at her. "Should we turn back?"

"No." Lenore's jaw twitched then she repeated, more firmly, "No. We've come too far to turn back. You need to know what happened to your sister. I need to get my spindles back. But we both need to be careful."

Cassia nodded. Of course she would be careful. If Avalon was still there, if she was alive, Cassia wanted to free her, not get trapped with her again.

"What kind of witch can get burned to death in an oven, come back to life, and shed her old skin to appear young and healthy?"

Lenore took a long time to answer. "No witch that I know of."

CASSIA HAD WALKED THIS path so many times, she knew every step, she knew the amount of time it took from when she left the school to when she arrived back at it again. When they were halfway through the journey—accounting for the fact the unicorns walked faster than a human—the path

forked. One way kept going straight, the other curved to the right until it joined back to itself again.

Lenore nudged the unicorns to the right.

“No,” Cassia said. “Keep going straight.”

“I *am* going straight,” Lenore protested.

Cassia lowered the charm, opened her other eye, and blinked a few times as the path warped before her. Suddenly the curved path was gone, and only the straight path remained. As Lenore had said, they were driving straight.

She raised the charm again, and they were back on the curving path.

“Give me the reins.”

Lenore let out a *tch* of irritation, but handed them over.

It was too late to turn back onto the left path, but once they had completed the loop Cassia kept turning until they were facing forward again. It was awkward to control the reins one-handed, but at least the unicorns didn’t balk when she guided them onto the straight path.

Lenore wasn’t nearly as placid. “What are you doing?” she gasped. “We’re headed for the trees.”

“No, we’re not.”

“I’m pretty sure we are!” Lenore snapped.

“I’m the one who can see the truth,” Cassia said wryly, “so you’re going to have to trust me.”

“I would,” Lenore shot back, “but you have a habit of stretching the truth.” She threw her arms up to shield her face from the branches of the trees that weren’t really there. “Cassia!”

Cassia urged the unicorns to pick up speed, figuring it was better for Lenore to get it over with quickly.

Lenore let out a string of curses before laughing in relief. “It was an illusion.”

The wood here was darker and denser. If not for the path, Cassia wasn’t sure they would’ve made it through the thick undergrowth. A shiver ran up her spine as memories she’d almost forgotten, memories she’d squashed deep down inside her, bubbled back to the surface. The twisted branches of the trees; the small, spiky shrubs; the creeping, hanging vines.

The scent of freshly baked gingerbread.

Without any fanfare, a clearing opened before them, and there, behind the candy cane fence, stood the gingerbread house.

CHAPTER SIX

CASSIA SAT FROZEN.

THERE it was. The gingerbread walls, the frosting on the roof, the sweets and licorice, and the candy cane fence.

Lenore rummaged through her bag of charms, muttering, “No, no, no,” and then, “That might do,” and finally, “It’s better than nothing.” She showed a handful of charms to Cassia. “These are all I have. Spinning virtues and vices is all I do. I can’t throw fireballs or turn people into frogs or brew love potions—”

“There are witches that can do that?” Cassia asked, but her voice wavered and the words came out so weak they wafted away on the breeze.

“—and I don’t know if these will be enough.”

Cassia reached over and closed Lenore’s fingers around the charms. She swallowed and forced her voice to be strong. “They’ll have to be.”

The gate let out an ominous creak when she pushed it open. She paused to glance at the window where she and Avalon had first broken off chunks of the sill to sate their hunger.

She would give anything to go back in time and tell those two girls to run for their lives.

The handle turned under her fingers and the door swung inward.

The cottage was as warm and cozy and inviting as that first day she’d followed the witch inside, so happy to no longer be lost in the woods, so tempted by the offer of food, that she didn’t think twice.

This time, she thought once, twice, three times, and still didn’t step inside.

Her chest felt full, her lungs tight, her breath shallow.

Lenore touched her shoulder. “You can do this, Cassia.” Her expression said she meant the words. Not only had she believed Cassia’s story about

the gingerbread house, she believed *in her*.

Cassia reached up to take Lenore's hand and squeezed tight before stepping inside and pulling the other woman in with her. A pot bubbled on the stove, a clock ticked on the wall, and the familiar sound of the chain whispering against the wafer flooring made Cassia shiver, but when she looked around, the room was empty.

"It's so small," Lenore said, walking to the stove to sniff at the pot.

"We slept up there." Cassia pointed to the loft. The ceiling was so low she doubted she'd even be able to stand upright there now. She pulled back the curtain that separated the witch's bedroom from the rest of the cottage.

There was little more than a simple bed, a chest of drawers, and a few scattered pieces of someone's life. A book. A tea cup. A plate dotted with crumbs.

She let the curtain fall back into place, and something on the ground caught her eye. It looked like a piece of the chain that had bound her and Avalon together, only the bright silver color had faded to a dull sheen. As she reached down for it, the front door slammed shut behind her, and Cassia spun around, her heart racing.

"The wind ..." Lenore said, her tone suggesting she didn't quite believe it.

"Avalon's not here." Cassia crossed the room to show her the remnant she'd found. "I think this was the chain that bound us."

Lenore studied it briefly before glancing around. "This place doesn't feel abandoned."

A feeling of dread settled over Cassia. She'd been wrong to come back here. Avalon had probably escaped years ago. All Cassia had done was deliver herself back into the witch's clutches. She may not have found the answers she'd been seeking, but she wanted nothing more than to leave.

"Let's find your spindles and get out of here."

"Do you mean these?" a voice purred from behind her.

Ice crawled up Cassia's spine as she turned around. Helene—in her youthful form—was sitting on the edge of the loft, her feet on the rungs on the ladder, a large box on her lap.

Helene's gaze shifted to the Spinster. "Why, hello again."

"Helene," Lenore said, her voice so cold that Cassia was surprised her breath didn't fog. "I'm here for what's mine."

“These?” Helene batted her eyelashes innocently. “You want them back, do you?”

Lenore took a step forward. “I never wanted you to take them in the first place!”

“Really?” Helene’s eyebrows arched. “Well, what a terrible misunderstanding on my part. Here. They’re all yours.” She held out the box.

Cassia caught Lenore’s arm before she could move. “Don’t. It’s a trap.”

“Looks like *you* have learned your lesson.” Helene stood up and walked down the ladder as if it were a staircase and not a near-vertical series of rungs. “But I’m not in the mood for tricks today.” She set the box on the table, opened the lid, and stepped back with her hands raised as if that meant she was harmless. “Go on, take them, and leave my sight.”

Lenore shrugged out of Cassia’s grasp. “You lied to me.”

“Did I?” Helene leaned back against the kitchen work bench and inspected her fingernails as if the secrets of the world were painted upon them. “That’s not how I remember it.”

“I trusted you.”

“And I delivered.” Helene’s expression darkened. “You made a wish, and I granted it. I have a reputation to uphold, and I do not renege on my deals.”

A sick feeling stirred in Cassia’s stomach. Why hadn’t she asked for more details of Lenore’s encounter with the witch? Lenore has told her nothing about how the spindles were stolen. And now it sounded like it had been more than a simple robbery.

“You took *everything* from me,” Lenore continued.

“As I recall, that was what you wanted.”

“No.” Lenore strode forward. “You twisted my words. You took the dreams and fantasies of a lonely young woman and turned them into bitter reality. Taking my spindles fixed nothing!”

“Only because you refused to let go of that ridiculous sense of duty.”

“I made the wrong decision, and I’ve suffered the consequences for ten years.”

Helene closed the distance between them, until the two women were face to face. “What is it with people who insist on punishing themselves?” she tutted. “I’m giving you what you want. Again. There are your spindles.

Take them. It's been ten years, I doubt anyone would fault me acquiescing to your demands."

Cassia couldn't see Lenore's face from where she was standing, but her shoulders were knotted tight. "What would you want in return?"

"Nothing. I'm simply dissolving our deal."

Lenore's hand twitched then she stepped forward and wrapped the witch in a hug. Helene startled but didn't pull away.

Cassia pressed her fist to her mouth as tears of fury burned in her eyes. How could she?

How *could* she?

Lenore knew what Helene had done to her and Avalon. And here she was, acting like they were friends.

Lenore stepped back and murmured, "Thank you," before turning to the box of spindles. She checked them quickly before latching the lid, picking the box up by the handle, and coming to stand beside Cassia.

Cassia couldn't meet her gaze, turning instead to glare at the witch.

"What about Avalon?" she ground out. "What did you do to her?"

"Don't look at me like that," Helene said, waving her hand dismissively. "It's not like I ground her bones to make bread."

"You threatened to ... to *eat* us," Cassia said, stumbling as the words caught in her throat.

The witch let out a light laugh. "You didn't actually believe that, did you? What do you take me for, a cannibal?"

"A cannibal, and a witch, and a despicable human being."

Helene dropped into one of the dining chairs and rolled her eyes, as if she was bored with their conversation. "Let's drop the pretense, shall we? How many witches do you know who can survive being burned alive?"

"None. I don't know any other witches at all." Cassia's voice wavered as anger battled with her fear. She clenched her fist around the chimera charm, relying on the bravery, single-mindedness, and confidence to keep her from backing down, from fleeing for her life before she found out the truth about Avalon.

"I'm not a *witch*." Helene wiggled her fingers and a swarm of gumdrops flew from the kitchen to land on the dining table. She picked one up and popped it in her mouth. "I'm the fairy godmother. I grant wishes and make dreams come true. And I usually like nothing more than playing games and

treating people like they're pieces on a chess board. But today I'm feeling charitable. So ask what you want to ask, and I shall answer straight."

Cassia shifted from one foot to the other, sensing another trap. But she needed to know. "What did you do to Avalon?"

"I didn't *do* anything to Avalon," Helene said, pausing to pick a sticky piece of gumdrop from between her teeth. "I didn't kill her and I certainly didn't eat her. I fed her, I housed her, I educated her, and when she was ready, I sent her off into the world. I told you. I have a reputation to protect. I uphold my bargains."

"What bargain?" Cassia demanded. "Avalon wouldn't have made a wish without telling me."

"Oh no, not *her*." Helene selected another gumdrop from the table. "I never grant children's wishes. Minors can't be held to a deal, and where would that leave me?"

"Then who?"

Helene slumped further down in her chair, as if tired by the questions. "Why don't you ask your parents?"

Cassia staggered back as if she'd been slapped. She couldn't believe her parents would make a deal with this witch—this so-called fairy godmother. But then she didn't want to believe that Lenore had, either.

"Where's Avalon now?"

"Well I'm sure I don't know." Helene tilted her head back, balanced a gumdrop on her nose, and jerked slightly so it dropped into her mouth. "You know, I haven't felt this good in ..." She sat up, and her gaze locked on Lenore. "What did you do to me?"

Lenore grabbed Cassia's arm and started to drag her toward the exit. "Time to go."

"But I don't know where Avalon is."

"She's not here; that's all that matters."

Helene lurched out of her seat and twisted around, pawing at the back of her gown. She let out a hiss, yanked something from the fabric of her skirts, and held it up in front of her face.

"You put a *charm* on me?" she spat.

"You put a charm on her?" Cassia echoed.

"More than one," Lenore said with a tight smile. "Come on."

They ran to the door, but the handle wouldn't turn. Cassia swallowed a scream of frustration. History was repeating itself. She was trapped in the gingerbread house *again*.

Lenore turned back to face Helene while Cassia ran to the window. She tugged on the latch, but it wouldn't budge.

"You have to let us go," Lenore said. "We don't have a deal with you."

Helene glared at her as she yanked another charm from the back of her dress. "That isn't how this works. I do as I please."

The window was made of four panes of sugar glass, giving a distorted view of the outside world. Cassia scanned the cottage, looking for something she could use to break it.

"You let Avalon go," Lenore continued, and Cassia wasn't sure where she got her confidence from, because she didn't think Helene worked on the same logic as anyone else. "I don't think you want to keep Cassia prisoner now."

Helene moved closer to the Spinster. "Maybe I let Avalon go because I knew Cassia would return to me."

There! Buried in the arm of the overstuffed couch was a short dagger. Cassia slid along the wall and kept her eyes on the witch as she closed her fingers around the hilt and yanked it out of the fabric. The handle was dark, like charred wood, and the blade was only the length of her finger, but the point looked sharp.

"She's not yours," Lenore said, her voice firm but surprisingly calm.

"She's not *yours*, either," Helene shot back, wrenching another charm free and tossing it aside. "You haven't taken on an apprentice, yet, have you?"

"Why would I?" Lenore snapped. "I had no spindles to pass on."

Cassia snuck back to the window. She placed the point of the dagger against the sugar glass, slipped off her shoe, and swung it like a hammer.

The sugar glass cracked, and a crevice spread all the way to the top of the pane. Another hit sent a small chunk tumbling out. Through the hole, she could see the wagon. Custard and Trifle weren't alone. Another unicorn was with them. They were rubbing necks and humming to each other.

If only Cassia could get to them. But it was no good. Even if she smashed all the glass panes out, they were each too small for her to fit through. She needed to open the whole window.

She yanked on the latch again and let out a howl of anger when it didn't give. The unicorns all turned to stare at her. She would've called to them if she thought they could help.

She was just going to have to eat her way out again. She shoved her foot back into her shoe, drew her hand back, and aimed the dagger at the wall.

Before she could strike, a chain closed around her wrist. A chain that was bright silver and controlled by magic. Cassia let out a gasp as it yanked her off balance and she crashed to her knees.

"No, no, no," Helene chided. "I can't have you destroying my house again. The poor thing was so upset last time that it took a week to recover."

"You ... don't ... have to ... do this," Lenore croaked. The other end of the chain was around her throat, lifting her so her toes barely touched the floor. Her fingers clawed at the chain as she tried to speak.

"Nobody tells me what to do."

"Let her go!" Cassia switched the dagger to her other hand and slashed at the chain, but the blade slipped off without making a mark. "It's me you want."

Helene made a pulling motion with her hand. The chain tightened and dragged Cassia closer to her. She jammed the dagger into the wafer flooring, using it to anchor herself in place. Her arms stretched, her joints groaned, her tendons strained.

Then the door exploded inward.

The unicorn who'd been standing with Custard and Trifle burst in through the shards. She let out a warbling war cry, reared on her hind legs, and struck out with the sharp nails of her front feet.

"What do you think you're doing?" Helene demanded.

By way of an answer, the unicorn leapt up beside Lenore and snapped her jaws shut around the chain. Her teeth cut clean through it, and the two pieces dulled as they fell to the floor, lifeless. Lenore dropped to her knees, coughing and sucking in huge breaths as she wrenched the now-inert chain from around her throat.

"No!" Helene howled. She reached for the chain, but neither piece jumped to her hand. "Not again!"

The unicorn let out another cry and lowered her head. Her fleece began to glow silver, and her horn burst out from under her fringe, growing long

and twisted and pointed. She stalked forward. Helene drew herself up tall as she retreated across the room.

Cassia released her grip on the dagger and flung her piece of chain away like a venomous snake, before scrambling over to help Lenore.

“Go!” Lenore grabbed the box of spindles and shoved Cassia through the empty doorway.

Outside, Custard and Trifle were watching them, their ears pricked forward. A worried clucking echoed around the clearing. Cassia scrambled up onto the seat of the wagon; Lenore shoved the box into the back before pulling herself up and flicking the reins to get the unicorns moving.

They burst into a gallop, throwing Cassia backward. Her heart kept pace with their hoofbeats, and she grabbed tight to the edge of the seat. The wagon rattled and bounced as they ate up the ground. Cassia glanced over her shoulder in case the witch was following them, but all she could see was a dense wall of forest as the path closed up behind them.

LENORE DREW THE UNICORNS to a stop beside the school house and exhaled all the stress and fear that had built up in her lungs. She wasn’t sure they’d truly left Helene behind, but she also knew that if the witch wanted to find them, there was nowhere in the Seven Realms they could hide.

“Did you hug her so you could put the charms on her?” Cassia asked. She was hunched over, her shoulders trembling.

“Yes.”

“I thought ...” Cassia sat up and gripped the edge of the seat. “You lied.”

“I was selective with the truth,” Lenore admitted.

“Yet you accused me of being a liar.”

“You are a liar,” Lenore snapped, irritation making her words short. “You lie all the time. About everything. I’m not sure if anything you told me was true, except for the damned gingerbread house. Did His Grace even send you to woo me, or did you make that up because you knew I was the one person who might help you find your sister?”

“If I’d known who you were, I would’ve known you were friends with the witch.”

Lenore rubbed at her eyes and let out another long breath, hoping to calm herself. “I’m sorry, Cassia,” she said, taking care with her tone. “I should

have been more upfront. When I met Helene, I didn't know what she was. It wasn't long after Faye had left, and I was having second thoughts about my vow. I was lonely, and Helene was like the sun bursting through the clouds. From the moment we met, we spent all our time together, and I thought being a Spinster wouldn't be so bad with a friend by my side. I even showed her the spindles, told her all about the vices and virtues. She seemed so ... nice. One of our favorite things was to lie on the grass, stare at the sky, and dream about a better life. 'I wish a prince would ride in on a white horse and sweep me off my feet. I wish I could spin straw into gold. I wish I had a flock of birds who would help with my chores.' One day she brought up my vow, and I said, 'I wish I didn't have these spindles.' She rolled onto her stomach, propped her chin on her hands, and said, 'If I could make your wish come true, what would you give me in return?'"

She'd tossed out a lot of silly ideas: a thousand gold coins, her firstborn child, all the stars in the sky. But Helene had said she had no need of coins, that Lenore was unlikely to have children because of her vow, and that the stars belonged to everyone.

"I offered her one of my unicorns. She agreed, and we shook on it. I thought we were playing, joking around. I didn't realize I'd just made a deal with the fairy godmother." Disgust caused bile to rise in Lenore's stomach. Disgust at Helene's trickery. Disgust at herself for falling for it. "The next morning Helene was gone. And so were my spindles. And so was Waffles."

"The unicorn that saved us?"

"That's her. And that's my story. The whole truth. I took my vow young, before I really understood what I was giving up. I had a moment of doubt. I wavered. And it cost me ten years."

Cassia shifted in her seat. Lenore reached over and took her hand. She had no right to ask what she wanted to ask, not after the story she'd just told, but she did it anyway.

"Helene mocked me for not having an apprentice, but I couldn't, not when I had no spindles to pass on. But now I do. I could teach you, if you'd like."

Cassia flinched, and Lenore knew she was going to say no. "I'm sorry, Lenore, but I need to find Avalon." She lifted her gaze to meet Lenore's, and her eyes were imploring, begging to be understood. "Now that I know she's alive, I can't give up, and ..." Her brows furrowed. "I need to find out

about the deal Helene mentioned. If my parents know something, that's where I need to start."

Lenore swallowed down her disappointment. "I understand. There's no rush to begin the journey home. It can wait until you've spoken to your parents."

Cassia shook her head. "You don't need to wait for me. I'm not sure where I'll go from here."

"You'll return to the duke, surely?"

"Maybe."

Lenore hated to abandon the young woman, but she also didn't want to linger so close to the gingerbread house. "If you ever change your mind, you know where to find me."

Cassia nodded. She reached into her pocket and offered Lenore the chimera charm.

"No," Lenore said. "You keep it. I made it for you. And you never know, it might still help you on your journey."

Cassia grasped the charm tightly as she leaned in to hug Lenore. "Thank you."

"No. Thank *you*."

Cassia started to step down from the wagon.

"At least let me take you to your parents' house."

Cassia jumped the rest of the way, turned around, and shook her head. "It's not far, and I need the time to think."

She retrieved her bag from the back, waved farewell, and walked away.

THE PATH FROM THE school to her house seemed more rutted than Cassia remembered, more overgrown with weeds, as if no one walked it anymore, as if the memory of the two girls who used to run this way to school was being overwritten by the forest.

The hairs on the back of Cassia's neck stood up.

She glanced over her shoulder but couldn't see anything unusual; the twists and turns of the path hid anyone who might be following her. She lifted her hand to where she'd pinned the chimera charm to the bodice of her dress. This was a path she'd walked often. If it was safe for her then, it was safe for her now.

When the shack she'd grown up in came into view, it looked slightly less dilapidated than Cassia remembered. The thatched roof had been replaced with fresh wooden shingles, white net curtains covered the windows, and the door had been painted a welcoming blue.

Her mother walked across the yard, a basket of clean laundry under her arm. She called merrily to the chickens as she passed, before disappearing inside.

Again, Cassia felt like she was being watched, but another glance behind her revealed nothing. She tightened her grip on her bag, approached the house, and did something she'd never done at her own home: knocked.

Her mother opened the door. She had more gray hairs than Cassia remembered, more wrinkles around her eyes, but the look she gave Cassia—as if she was unsure which twin she was looking at—was the same.

“Cassia?”

“How have you been, Mother?” She decided it didn't hurt to be polite.

“Getting on,” she said, as if Cassia were a friendly neighbor and not her own daughter whom she hadn't seen for two years. “I suppose you want to come in.”

“Only if you have a moment to spare.” She stepped inside the shack, which was still as gloomy as ever, and found she'd timed her arrival well. After a day spent in the woods, her father was home for supper.

He was seated at the small desk where he completed his paperwork, tucked away in the corner of the room. He stood up when he saw her.

“Cassia?”

“Hello, Father.”

“Father?” he laughed. “When did you stop calling me ‘Papa’?” He strode over to her, wrapped her in a hug, then held her at arm's length. He was thinner than she remembered, as if the years had taken their toll. “You look like you're doing well.”

“I'm surviving.”

“You'll expect to stay for supper, then?” her mother muttered. While the families in the hamlet often had a hot meal at midday, her family always had theirs at night, as her parents were often too deep in the woods during the day to return home to eat.

Cassia had to admit that whatever was in the oven smelled good, but she had no appetite for food. “Tell me about the wish.”

Instead of feigning confusion, her parents shared a worried look.

“There’s no need to go over that,” her mother said, fleeing to check the oven. “It all happened so long ago.”

Cassia turned to her father. If only she had Lenore’s brooch of boastfulness, she could make him tell her everything.

“It’s been ten years,” he said, as if that made a difference.

“Tell me what you wished for, and what you traded in return.”

Her mother stomped to the dining table and unceremoniously dropped two plates onto it, almost slopping the food over the side, before returning for a third. “We may as well eat before this conversation ruins our appetites.”

Cassia followed her father to the table and took her usual seat. She stared at the empty place across from her, where Avalon had once sat.

“You have to understand,” her father began, “we were very poor.”

Cassia poked at the jointed chicken on her plate.

“That winter when you were ten was the hardest we’d ever faced. Half our chickens stopped laying. Our stores rotted. The duxes had just announced a new tax on milled wood and redrawn the permit boundaries. We didn’t have enough food.” His gaze shifted to her mother. “We tried to shield you girls from the worst of it, but your poor mother was getting so thin she could barely lift an axe, and I’d picked up a cough I couldn’t shake. We thought, if only we could survive the winter, the spring would see everything right. If only we had enough food for all of us ...”

“That’s what we wished for.” Her mother stabbed a piece of potato as if she was trying to kill it, and picked up the story. “We only wished we had enough food, and the fairy godmother showed up, telling us she could make our wish come true, filling our heads with fantasies of feasts fit for the duxes. We were already salivating when she told us the catch.” Her expression twisted as she slammed her fork onto the table. “Because there’s always a catch. No one does nothing for free.”

Her father cleared his throat. “She said she would take you girls away for the winter. She would keep you fed and warm, leaving me and your mother to share the food here. There would be plenty enough for only two.”

“You girls had the biggest appetites,” her mother snipped.

“But after the winter,” her father continued, “only one of you would be free to return.”

Pain shot through Cassia's chest, and she fought to suck in a breath. "How could you?" she gasped.

Her mother gave her a sour look. "It was either that or all of us would starve together."

"No." Cassia's voice caught on a lump in her throat, and she had to swallow hard. "How could you pick *me* over Avalon?"

Her father's head drooped. "We didn't get to choose."

Cassia's head swam, and she gripped tightly to the table to keep herself upright. If only she'd done better at the spinning, maybe Avalon could have gone free.

Her father reached for her hand, but she pulled away. "It wasn't what we wanted, but you know what I always say, if a tree falls in the forest, and there's no one around to hear it ..."

"Claim the wood," Cassia finished automatically.

It made sense, in a perverse way. There wasn't enough food for all of them, and when the witch had offered her parents a solution—one less mouth to feed—they'd taken it.

But it wasn't the choice Cassia would have made. She wouldn't have sacrificed one of her children to save herself.

Except ... hadn't she done exactly that? Sacrificed Avalon to save herself?

She jumped up, her supper untouched. "She threatened to *eat* us! We were chained up. Imprisoned. Forced to work."

"But you were fed and warm and alive." Her mother fixed her with a fierce look, unapologetic for the decision she'd made.

Cassia shot her a look right back. "When I told you about the witch, you called me a liar, you said I was making up stories, you barely even looked for Avalon. If you'd told me the truth, I wouldn't have spent the last ten years tormented."

"Yes, you would have," her father said quietly.

Yes, she would have.

Cassia clenched her trembling hands into fists. She wondered if Avalon knew the truth, if Helene had told her that she'd been sacrificed so her family wouldn't starve to death, if she'd believed it.

"Avalon's free now," she said, looking from her father's downturned gaze to her mother's defiant one. "But I don't imagine she'll be paying you

a visit. Here.” She shoved her plate across the table to her mother. “You can have mine. I’m not hungry.”

She fled out of the gloomy shack and into the too-bright glare of the setting sun. She shoved her way through the gate and left her childhood home behind for good.

Maybe she’d been too quick to send Lenore on her way. Because now she faced a long walk to ... well, she wasn’t sure where to go now.

Back to the duke’s house? But what good was his library? She didn’t need to comb the records for references to the gingerbread house.

Her plan had fallen apart spectacularly.

She had no idea what her next step was or where to look for Avalon, no idea whether the witch would come seeking revenge.

As she stalked up the road—she might not know her destination, but anywhere that wasn’t *here* was good for now—a flash of silver caught her eye before disappearing between the trees.

“Hey!” she called out, racing after it.

When she reached the place she’d seen the movement, she stopped and scanned the woods. A faint hum and the snap of a twig drew her attention to the right. There, just off the path, trying her best to hide behind a tree but failing spectacularly, was the unicorn who’d saved them from the gingerbread house.

What had Lenore called her? Pancake? Whipped Cream?

“Waffles?”

The unicorn poked her head out from behind the tree and made a friendly hum.

“Come out from there,” Cassia said. “You don’t know what could be lurking in the woods.”

Waffles pulled back her lips to show off her pointed teeth. Maybe *Waffles* was the thing lurking in the woods that other creatures needed to fear. But she trotted out and stood in front of Cassia expectantly.

“Thank you for saving us from the witch,” she said, hoping that gratitude was all the unicorn wanted. “I guess you’re free to go now, too.”

The click of the unicorn’s clawed feet on the packed dirt followed her as she headed along the road. Cassia turned around, and the unicorn scrambled to the side to chew on a clump of grass in the path in a show of fake nonchalance.

It looked like she'd picked up a friend.

And she knew of someone who very desperately wanted a unicorn of her own.

Maybe the duke's library was of no use to her, but his money was.

She took a tentative step closer to the animal. "How do you feel about being petted, and ridden, and probably dressed up in all sorts of ridiculous ribbons and hats?"

Waffles lifted her head and flicked her ears.

"Come on, then. We have a long walk ahead of us."

LENORE DIDN'T WANT TO stay in the hamlet, but she didn't get far before it became too dark to continue. She parked on the side of the road, let the unicorns slip into the woods to hunt, and climbed into the back of the wagon where she hung a lantern from the framing, sat on her bed, and set the box of spindles in front of her.

She ran her fingers across the smooth wood, popped the latches, and opened the lid. The box was tiered, and the top layer moved with the lid, revealing the layer underneath. All the spindles were there, each one sitting in a padded compartment.

Lenore touched them like a pianist placing her fingers on the keys. She closed her eyes and let their song flow through her.

Ten years.

Ten long years she'd been separated from her spindles. The foolish girl she'd once been hadn't thought they meant much to her—she'd only had them for a month, after all—but she was wrong. When Helene had taken them, Lenore had felt as if a piece of her heart had gone with them.

What was left of her heart clung tightly to her vow to never marry. If she kept that one, if she never wavered, maybe it would make up for her mistake.

She'd earned her spindles back, through diligence and patience and loyalty.

She was complete once more.

And she would never be so careless again.

An upbeat rap on the back of the wagon startled her out of her reverie. She slammed the lid of the box shut, hid it in the storage compartment

under the bed, and grabbed the cudgel that she kept under her pillow. A woman who spent many a night sleeping alone in her wagon couldn't be too careful.

She held the cudgel by her side as she pulled back the canvas at the end of the wagon.

Cassia smiled up at her.

Lenore's chest filled with hope. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought about what you said, and I changed my mind." She twisted a strand of hair around her finger. "If the offer's still valid, I'd like to become your apprentice."

Lenore paused before she spoke, tempering her reaction in case she scared Cassia away. "Yes, of course it's still valid. I'd love to teach you." She pulled the canvas wide, and Cassia clambered up into the wagon beside her. "How did things go with your parents?"

Cassia shrugged as she surveyed the interior of the wagon, as if the chaos from their bumpy flight through the forest was much more interesting than what had happened with her mother and father. "Um ... it went as expected. Nothing's changed."

Nothing except her outfit.

Cassia was now wearing a simple, dark green dress, laced at the front over a cream peasant blouse, fawn leggings, and knee-length boots.

Lenore felt a wave of pity that the young woman had dressed up in an attempt to impress her parents, only to be disappointed. She decided not to spread the hurt by mentioning it further. Instead, she retrieved the box of spindles and laid it out.

Cassia's hand drifted forward, but she caught herself. "May I?"

"Of course."

Lenore was curious to see which one she would be drawn to. Cassia's hand hovered over the box before she reached in and carefully removed a spindle made of golden-hued elm.

"To spin the magic," Lenore said, "you have to be able to hear the spindle's song. If you can't hear the song, you can't harmonize, and you won't know if you're too sharp or too flat."

This was the key moment. If Cassia couldn't hear the tune, there was nothing Lenore could teach her. Hope twisted her stomach into a knot. Cassia had recognized the unicorns, which meant she had a touch of magic

in her. But she'd also spun the bracelet around her wrist, which had sounded flat. That was due either to inexperience or obliviousness. Time and practice could counteract the first but not the second.

Cassia held the shaft loosely in her left hand and rolled the whorl back and forth along her thigh with the other. Her eyes slid shut, and she swayed side to side in time with the rolling. Then she started to hum.

Goosebumps broke out on Lenore's arms. The note was perfect. Cassia's voice rang around the wagon like a tuning fork. Lenore could feel the vibration in her chest, in her lungs. She closed her eyes, opened her mouth, and added her voice to the song.

Something prickled along her skin as if her goosebumps had goosebumps. The air in the wagon felt charged, like a thunderstorm was rolling in. The magic of the spindle was pouring out, and without fiber to focus and contain it, would soon soak through the wood and canvas of the wagon and burst uncontrolled into the world.

Lenore had a moment to be grateful that it was a virtue—friendliness—and not a vice that they were emitting. But even so, it wasn't right to scatter magic carelessly. With grim determination, she snapped her lips shut and swallowed the last of the sound. Then she placed her hand over Cassia's, and the young woman fell silent. She blinked as if waking from a long slumber.

"That was amazing," she murmured.

"Like you've been doing it all your life," Lenore said.

Cassia gave her a bright smile. "But now I don't have to do it alone."

Lenore didn't contradict her, not with friendliness still saturating the air, because it wouldn't happen for years, but if Cassia did train as her apprentice, Lenore would eventually have to hand over the spindles and leave.

That was how it worked.

They were called the Order of Spinsters for a reason. They stood in rows down through the years, mentor to apprentice to apprentice to apprentice. One after the other.

They were the Order. Not the Assembly. Not the Band or the Bundle. Not the Collective, or the Community, or the Congregation.

Apart from a short overlap, there was only ever one Spinster for each set of spindles, and each Spinster kept to herself, protected her spindles, spun

her magic, and searched for her replacement.

Lenore hadn't expected to find one so soon, but she wasn't about to turn Cassia away. Not when it seemed like so many people had already done exactly that.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CASSIA GOT A FEW strange looks as Waffles walked along beside her. The unicorn didn't walk placidly. She pranced around and pounced on motes of light. She ran up to any passing llamas and tried to get them to play. She hummed, and honked, and hollered.

In the first village they came to, Cassia talked a llama farmer into trading her a bridle in exchange for the latest accessory out of the west designed to protect a llama's sensitive ears from ear blight—otherwise known as Cassia's cravat. With the bridle and lead giving the illusion that Cassia had Waffles under control, the looks stopped.

She arrived back at the duke's summer home on the afternoon of the second day. Once again dressed in her vest and trousers—minus the cravat—she strode confidently through the gate and across the courtyard. The doors blew open and Felicity flew out, squealing with joy. When she reached them, she threw her arms around Waffles' neck and buried her face in the animal's fleece.

"Is she really mine?" she asked, her words muffled.

Cassia met the unicorn's gaze before answering, "If she wants to be."

Felicity pulled back, reached up to smooch Waffles' cheeks, and said, "Oh, *please* be mine."

Waffles let out a happy hum, ducked her head, and flicked out her tongue to swipe Felicity across the face.

"I'm going to name you ..." She stared hard into the unicorn's eyes. "Waffles?" She wrapped her arms around the unicorn's neck again. "I love you, Waffles."

The duke came to stand behind his daughter. "You have returned triumphant," he said to Cassia.

"Yes, Your Grace."

“Take the animal around to the stables then come to my study. We’ll arrange your compensation.”

While Cassia and Waffles walked around the manor house to the stables, Felicity ran full speed ahead of them, yelling Grayson’s name, then doubled back, calling, “Llama, llama, llama!”

When they reached the stables, Grayson was leaning against the door frame, a dubious look on his face.

“A llama in with my horses?” he said, and Cassia was certain it was a concern he wouldn’t have voiced if the duke had been within hearing.

“Llamas are great guards,” Felicity gushed. “They always protect their herd, whether their herd is other llamas, sheep, or even horses.”

“That’s right.” Cassia crouched down in front of Felicity. “And this isn’t any old llama. Waffles is very special. She’s a unicorn, and she saved me from a wicked witch.”

Felicity’s eyes widened. She turned to Waffles and said in an awed voice, “I *knew* you were special.” Then she led the animal into the stall Grayson had prepared.

“You shouldn’t tell stories,” he said, giving Cassia a slightly disappointed look. “She’ll believe you.”

“Maybe more people should believe. It might make the world a better place.”

As she turned to head for the manor house, Grayson’s voice stopped her. “I’m glad Waffles saved you.” He shifted awkwardly, as if sharing a joke—or what he thought was a joke—wasn’t his preferred method of building rapport. He cleared his throat. “Miss Felicity would’ve been sad if you’d been killed by a witch.”

She smiled. “Me too.”

She was ushered up to the duke’s study without being made to wait this time, and the duke bustled in a moment later.

“It seems congratulations are in order,” he said, settling himself behind his desk. “Am I to assume you were successful in both parts of your mission? Have you cured Lenore of her infatuation with me?”

“Indeed, Your Grace,” Cassia said.

“Did she demand any price?”

“No, in the end, she was quite happy to bequeath a llama to Felicity as a parting gift.”

“Well, excellent.” The duke leaned over to pick up a small chest and set it on the desk. He opened the lid to reveal a mound of gold coins.

Cassia couldn’t help but let out a small gasp.

The chest—if he let her keep it—didn’t look too heavy for her to carry but would require both hands, leaving none free to defend herself from any robbers. And she’d just given away Waffles, who would have made a great pack animal.

Then the duke leant down, retrieved a second chest, and set it next to the first. It was equally full of coins. “You may count them,” he said, leaning back in his chair and rubbing his stomach, as if sated from a good meal. “I won’t be offended.”

Cassia swallowed. There was no way she could manage two chests. She would have to bury them somewhere and hope no one found them. A thousand gold coins had sounded life-changing, but it was also incredibly impractical. She couldn’t travel freely with the chests, and if she did bury them, she would be bound to return frequently to that spot to refill her purse. She could use the money to buy a small cottage somewhere, set up a home for when she found Avalon, but she could be gone for weeks or months at a time searching for her sister. And as of now, she had no idea where to even start looking.

She slid her hand up to her collar and brushed her fingers against the chimera charm she’d clipped there. It allowed her to be bold.

“If Your Grace would allow it, I have a proposal.”

His brows crashed together. “Are you going to hold me to ransom now that you have delivered the beast, knowing it would break Felicity’s heart to take it away?”

“Of course not, Your Grace.” Cassia tore her eyes away from the glittering gold and perched on the edge of the chair facing the duke. “I am satisfied with our bargain, but I’m afraid a thousand gold coins is rather impractical.”

“Go on,” he said.

“Keep five hundred coins in trust for me, pay them out to me monthly as a wage, and let me stay here in your employ.”

“You would work for me?”

“Yes.”

“Why, when the coins are already yours?”

Why? was an excellent question, and one she didn't have an answer for except that she had no better ideas, and earning the favor of the duke could set her in good stead for the future.

"To be honest," she said, preparing to be anything but, "I have become rather fond of Waffles—"

"Waffles?"

"Miss Felicity's llama. And although your groom and stable master take excellent care of your horses, I doubt they have much experience with llamas. Someone needs to take proper care of the animal, shear her, trim her nails, and protect her from ear blight."

"Ear blight?" The duke blinked.

"And, of course, someone needs to teach Miss Felicity how to ride."

"And you would pay your own wage to do this?"

"In return, if you would allow me, a curious student, access to your library and perhaps grant me some insight into how a wise man such as yourself goes about ruling a realm, I would consider myself fairly compensated."

The duke glanced at the portrait of his wife before murmuring, "I'm not certain I know." He let out a long breath as he stroked his trim goatee. He clearly had other things on his mind, but returning to the topic at hand, he asked, "And the other five hundred?"

Cassia chewed on her lip, wondering if she really had the gall to ask what she was about to ask. "It is of a personal matter, Your Grace. Forgive me for being blunt, but I'm of the understanding you eventually intend to offer your brother in marriage to certain lady."

The duke wore an impressive mask. His expression in no way revealed his thoughts about her statement. "What if I am?"

"Don't." She recoiled at her own bluntness, but the duke didn't seem to take offense. "Let him choose who he wants to wed, if he even wants to wed at all."

"I see," he said slowly. "You offer the five hundred as a dowry?"

Cassia didn't know the intricacies of noble matrimony. When the people around her hamlet married, there was no money exchanged, it was simply about two people coming together for love, pooling their resources, and sharing their burdens. But Lenore had mentioned that her mentor had paid a dowry to compensate for the fact she would never wed. And if gifting the

coins to Grayson allowed him to buy his way into—or out of—a marriage of his choosing, then that sounded good to her. “Yes.”

“And Grayson is amenable to your offer?”

She didn’t want to admit that she hadn’t spoken to him about it, but considering he was facing the prospect of marrying someone against his will, surely he would be content knowing he was no longer duty bound. “Yes, Your Grace.”

The duke relaxed again, his expression softening. “I understand now, but I cannot make this decision hastily. I will keep your coins in trust for a month, during which time you will live here in my employ as you have requested. Once the month has passed, I will render my verdict, and you will be free to go or stay as you see fit.”

Cassia fought to keep her expression sober as she stood. “Thank you, Your Grace, that is most gracious of you.”

Before she left, Cassia took two gold coins from her chest. They would be plenty enough to live on, once she’d exchanged them for silvers and coppers, and she could always request more if she needed it.

Somehow, she felt more settled than she had in years.

She knew for certain that Avalon was alive, and she had the resources to launch a new search for her sister.

As soon as she figured out where to start looking.

SINCE CASSIA WAS GOING to be working mostly in the stables, they put her up in the wooden, two-story stable house—a bunk house behind the stables where the grooms and stable hands stayed. The bottom floor was a single room loosely divided into sections with comfortable couches, a table and chairs, basic facilities for making tea, and a place to wash up. Upstairs were the sleeping quarters, where everyone had a mattress stuffed with wool, a small cabinet for their personal possessions, and a curtain for the illusion of privacy.

They ate their meals in the kitchens of the main house, with the other staff.

Dinner that night was rather a revelation compared to the garden party Cassia had last attended.

They ate after the nobles, after the kitchen staff had cleaned up, after the footmen and parlor maids had finished serving. The only people missing were the personal attendants: the duke's butler and Felicity's governess. There was almost constant chattering and laughter, and it didn't take Cassia long to relax. She couldn't let her guard down entirely, but she knew that she could be more herself amongst the servants than anyone else.

She leaned in closer to Grayson, who was seated beside her, chatting with one of the gardeners on his other side. "I can see why you prefer this to dining with the nobles."

The gardener, who's name was Tobin, snorted a laugh. "Who even needs that many forks?"

"So," an older maid, named Alice, called to Cassia from the end of the table, "how did you make your way into His Grace's favor?"

"It was luck, really."

Alice laughed good-naturedly. "I could do with some of your luck."

"Oh, it isn't all good, trust me."

"You have a story to tell then?"

"More than one, but ..." She glanced around the table, at their friendly, curious gazes, and couldn't resist. "I'm not sure you'll have the stomach for it."

"Go on," Tobin said. "Most of us have known each other forever. No new stories here."

"Well ..." she said, feigning reluctance. "Have you ever been to Ravenglove Forest?"

When the only responses were negatives, she warmed to the telling.

"Not many people have. The people who live at the edge of the wood are a superstitious lot, and they think a witch lives in the very center of the forest."

A young page boy gasped involuntarily then blushed.

"When my sister and I were very small, our parents would always warn us to stay on the paths and out of the trees, but we wouldn't listen. We didn't think the witch would be interested in skinny little things like us."

"Skinny?" someone said in a gently teasing tone, but Cassia didn't mind. Her body was big and strong, and she refused to starve it ever again.

"One day, we were playing hide and seek, and wandered too far from the path. The sunlight barely penetrated the thick canopy, no birds dared make

their nests there, and the only creatures that slithered through the undergrowth had far too many legs. But all was well,” she said with fake cheer. “My sister and I came upon a cute little cottage in the wood. The old lady who lived there was so kind. She invited us in, fed us a hearty meal, and put us to bed.”

Grayson’s brow creased with worry. She’d certainly caught him with her story, and she could tell he knew it wouldn’t end well.

“When I awoke, a chain so heavy that I could barely walk was wrapped around my ankle, and my poor sister was locked in a cage that hung from the ceiling. You see, we’d found the witch, and by accepting her invitation inside, we’d fallen under her power.”

A little embellishment didn’t hurt. All eyes around the table were on her. All the plates of food sat forgotten.

“For a month, I worked day and night. I scrubbed the floors, chopped firewood, plucked chickens, clipped the witch’s horrid toenails. Every day the witch would cook a sumptuous feast, and feed it to my sister through the bars of her cage. I would sit underneath her, catching the crumbs she dropped and trying to give myself enough energy for the next day’s work. Every night, the witch would reach through the bars of the cage, pinch my sister’s arm with her fingers, and declare her almost plump enough to eat.”

Cassia paused, lifted a piece of gravy-coated beef to her mouth, and chewed slowly.

“What happened?” the same young page prompted.

“How did you escape?” Alice asked.

Cassia swallowed and lowered her voice to a whisper. “One night, the witch decided she would eat my sister the very next day. I got up early, split a wagonload of firewood, and started to stoke the oven. Soon it was burning brighter and hotter than it ever had. The witch awoke, complaining about the heat. I told her the damper was stuck. When she came over to inspect it, I pulled the door wide, shoved her inside, and slammed it shut again.” She paused, enjoying their anticipation. “Then I listened to her scream.”

She glanced around the table, holding the gaze of anyone bold enough to meet hers, daring them to call her a liar. She turned to Grayson and said, almost absently, “This beef is delicious. It reminds me of the witch. Although, she was a little bit *overcooked*.”

A stunned silence hung over the room.

Grayson eyes twitched, and he ducked his head, trying not to laugh—she hoped.

The page boy fled out the door, and a faint retching sound came from his direction. Cassia didn't look. She just stabbed another slice of beef with her fork and chewed heartily.

After dinner, as they headed back to their bunk house, Grayson walked quietly beside her. "You shouldn't trick people with stories like that."

"Oh, don't worry," she said, still riding high on a tale well told. "Every word could be true, and they wouldn't believe me, but they'll remember I spun a horrifyingly good yarn, and that's all that matters."

Grayson rubbed at the back of his neck. "You said before that your sister was lost in the forest, but what actually happened?"

Because it was Grayson, she decided to tell him the truth. "We really were playing hide and seek, and we really did find a witch's cottage, and she really did keep us prisoner, though it wasn't quite as unpleasant as I made out. She did fall into the oven. I didn't push her, but I did latch the door so she couldn't get out." She paused and swallowed, as if the aridity of the truth had parched her throat. "I didn't eat her. Because she didn't stay dead long enough for that. I managed to escape. My sister didn't."

She lifted her gaze to look at him. His expression told her nothing. Regret heated her cheeks, and her temper rose with her temperature.

"Go on," she demanded, "call me a liar. Tell me that witches aren't real. Tell me that I made it all up to better cope with Avalon's disappearance."

He studied her for a moment. "If you say it's the truth, I believe you."

"Oh," she said, taken aback by his acceptance.

"So, you don't even know if your sister's dead or alive?"

"I'm fairly certain she's alive. The little trip I took with Lenore was to find the witch's house."

His jaw dropped. "You went *back* to the witch's house? What happened?"

"It wasn't good. We only escaped because Waffles saved us. But the witch told me she hadn't killed Avalon, that she'd let her go."

"And you believe her?"

Cassia nodded, deciding it was too complicated to explain about the charms that Lenore had put on Helene or about how the witch had been

honest about the deal she'd made with Cassia's parents. She seemed to prefer to hurt with truths rather than lies.

"How are you going to find your sister?" he asked, as simple as that. "Or how will she find you?"

"That I do not know, but in exchange for Waffles, the duke has granted me access to his library. I don't know what I'm hoping to find there, but I had no other ideas."

Grayson rubbed at his jaw and said, "Hmm," which she took to mean he didn't think she would find anything useful. "I would suggest the tax records," he said, "as every land holder has to document all their servants and vassals, but that only happens once a year. How long has she been free?"

Cassia gave a hopeless shrug.

He lifted his gaze to the sky, thinking. "We could check the census, though it was last done three years ago, and I doubt it'll have an entry for your witch's house. Probably worth doing, anyway. You never know what we'll find. But our biggest problem—"

"Wait." Cassia raised her hand to stop him, and his gaze snapped down to meet hers. "You said 'we.'"

His brow furrowed. "Yes ...?"

"Do you mean to help me?"

Pink tinged his tan cheeks, and his gaze completed its descent to his toes. "Oh. Sorry. No, course not. You don't need me to—"

"Grayson!"

He flinched and fell silent.

"Are you *offering* to help me?"

"Well ..." He crossed his arms but uncrossed them again. "Yes."

She inhaled so fully and so deeply that she was certain her lungs would burst, then she let out an embarrassing squeal of joy, pounced forward to wrap him in a hug, and squeezed him so tight that she lifted his feet off the ground.

"Whoa there," he said, his arms gripping her shoulders to steady himself. "Does this mean you *want* my help, Miss Cassia?"

"Yes, of course!" She pulled back to grin at him. "I have no idea what I'm doing. All I know about taxes is the strife my parents went through every year calculating what they owed, and though I knew they counted

everybody for the census, I had no idea they retained that information. Already you've helped me. A moment ago I was lost in the woods with no clear path ahead, and now you've pulled the branches aside and shown me the way."

"Don't get too excited," he said. "There's a pothole in the path. Most of the records are kept at the duke's main house in the north. There are duplicates here, in case of fire or flood, but not of everything. We may not find what we need."

"Well if we don't, we'll just have to concoct an elaborate scheme to make a road trip."

Grayson let out a sigh. "My life was a lot simpler before you came along."

Cassia grinned again. "But I bet it wasn't as much fun."

LENORE GUIDED THE WAGON back to her cottage slowly, taking regular breaks to eat and drink and introduce Cassia to the spindles. The young woman touched them reverently, handled them carefully, and whispered their names like they were sacred. The only time they hurried on their journey was when they passed the location where the tree hunt had stopped, though the clearing was once again empty. Lenore hoped they were far away by now, as she didn't fancy another encounter with the giants.

They stopped that evening in a small village, setting up the wagon as Lenore usually did by a small collection of food stalls.

"Can you see to Trifle," she asked, "while I tend to Custard?"

Cassia frowned, unsure, and Lenore realized she probably couldn't tell the animals apart yet.

"The one on the left," she added, moving to unbuckle Custard from her harness on the right.

Cassia gave an embarrassed laugh as she hurried to release Trifle. Once the animals were fed, watered, brushed down, and given room to roam on their long ropes, the women sat in their folding chairs at the side of the wagon, with the compartments open to display their wares.

Lenore didn't have any unicorn fiber with her, but she gave Cassia some llama fiber and a mundane spindle to practice the art of spinning. She

picked it up immediately. Her hands were a little unsteady, and the thread came out a little uneven, but Lenore had been right about her natural talent.

It seemed so wrong that Helene had discarded her work instead of helping her improve.

Cassia worked into the night, spinning all the llama fiber that Lenore could find, and each time she filled the shaft, her technique improved. Her hands grew steadier and more assured, and her thread grew smoother and more even.

They slept on the cots on either side of the wagon, and in the middle of a dream about attempting to herd reluctant unicorns, something startled Lenore awake. She stared into the darkness, seeing nothing at first, hearing only Cassia's ragged breathing.

"Are you all right?" she whispered, pushing up onto her elbow, listening hard in case something outside had disturbed her.

"Sorry," Cassia murmured. "Nightmare." Her breathing started to slow. "It felt so real ... I thought I was still trapped in the gingerbread house." She paused, and Lenore wondered if the darkness helped or hindered her forthrightness. "How can I be sure that *this* isn't the dream?"

"This has to be real," Lenore said softly. "It's far too mundane." She paused, uncertain if her reassurances would do any good. "You're free; you're safe; Helene can't hurt you here."

The cot creaked as Cassia shifted around, and her voice dropped so low, Lenore wasn't sure she heard the words correctly. "If Helene wanted to hurt me, she could. We won't truly be free or safe until she's gone."

Lenore didn't know what to say to that, so she stayed silent, and eventually Cassia's breathing slowed as she fell back to sleep.

They finished the remainder of their journey the next day. Lenore was glad to be home, though she knew Cassia was right. They weren't truly safe. If Helene wanted to hunt them down, she would, but she'd left Cassia alone for the past ten years, so there was hope she would continue to do so.

The unicorns emerged from the wood to greet them—or, more likely, to welcome Custard and Trifle back. Lenore parked the wagon and went through the process of brushing the unicorns down before releasing them into the forest to hunt.

It was only when they were unloading the wagon that something occurred to her. "Where's your bag?" she asked Cassia.

Cassia paused as she reached for a basket of yarn. “Oh, um, I left it at my parents’ place. Couldn’t bear to go back for it. It contained nothing important, anyway.”

Lenore reached down from where she was standing in the wagon to touch Cassia’s shoulder. The young woman flinched, ever so slightly. “I’m sorry things didn’t go well. And I’m sorry we didn’t find your sister.”

“She’s free,” Cassia said with a tight smile. “That’s all that matters.”

Lenore frowned. She wasn’t sure that *was* all that mattered, and she hated to see Cassia give up hope.

Her cottage was small, consisting of little more than the kitchen with its small dining table at the back, the sitting room with its comfortable couches and worktable at the front, and two bedrooms upstairs under the rafters.

Cassia walked in as if she didn’t feel entirely welcome. Since she’d only ever seen the kitchen, Lenore gave her a quick tour, including the wardrobe where she kept her clothes.

“You can borrow anything you need,” Lenore said. “But we should get you some more. Where did you get those work clothes you wore? They looked to be excellent quality.”

“Oh ...” Cassia glanced around, as if the answer to the question was hiding somewhere in the room. “I’d had them for ages.”

“Really? They looked new.”

The corner of Cassia’s eye twitched. “Yes, what I meant was I’d *bought* them a long time ago but hadn’t worn them yet.”

“Well, the seamstress in the village does adequate work.”

“I don’t have any coins.”

Lenore gave her a tender smile. She didn’t think Cassia would accept charity, so she offered her something better. “Then you’d better get to work.”

They spent the rest of the week spinning unicorn fiber into thread. For every virtue, they spun half as much of each vice. When Cassia asked why, Lenore paused to gather her thoughts, recalling what her mentor had told her so many years earlier.

“Do you remember I told you that vices aren’t always bad? That it’s the balance that’s important?”

Cassia nodded. “Sure.”

“Imagine a piece of thread ...” Lenore picked up the spindle she’d been working, unwound some of the thread, and held it taut so Cassia didn’t have to imagine. “At this end”—she wiggled the fingers of her left hand—“is one vice, one extreme, a deficiency. Self indulgence. At the other end”—she wiggled her right—“is the other extreme, an excess. Deprivation.”

“How can deprivation be an excess?” Cassia asked, a doubtful look on her face.

Lenore winced. She should’ve chosen a different example, but it was too late now. Unfortunately, Faye had left before teaching her how to be a good mentor. “It’s an excess of temperance.”

“Oh. That’s confusing.” Cassia grinned, as if she found the situation amusing.

“Sorry.” Lenore cleared her throat and forged on. She caught the thread in the hook of the spindle and let it sag to the middle. “Halfway between the two extremes is a happy medium. A virtue. Temperance. Not too much self indulgence, not too much deprivation.”

“Then why not just spin temperance? Why spin the vices at all?”

Lenore was certain she’d explained this on the way to the gingerbread house, but maybe Cassia had been too worried about what they would find there to take it in. “Because sometimes people need a little self indulgence to counteract their own natural inclination toward deprivation. Just like you need a little boastfulness to counteract that bracelet on your wrist.”

Cassia crossed her arms as if she had been scolded, tucking her hands deep under her armpits.

Lenore didn’t want to push her, but she knew the sooner she removed the bracelet the better. It would be simple now. Lenore’s unicorn horn scissors were in their pocket inside the lid of the box, and she slid them out. “We can remove it—”

Cassia jumped up, and the spindle she’d been using tumbled to the floor. She made no attempt to catch it, as her hands were too busy tugging the hems of her sleeves down to her knuckles. “I’m fine.”

“Wait, please.”

Maybe Cassia stayed because she was willing to listen to Lenore’s argument. Maybe she merely had nowhere else to go.

“Did you see the way Waffles bit through the chain that Helene was using against us? It fell clean in half, its magic drained. These”—she

offered the scissors—“will do the same thing.”

Cassia shook her head. “No.”

“No? Don’t you want to be free of its influence?”

Cassia gave another tight shake. “It doesn’t matter.”

Lenore wanted to tell Cassia to sit herself down and do as she was told, like she was a disobedient child. But she wasn’t a child. So instead, Lenore took a breath to calm herself. “It *does* matter. That charm affects you, and it will affect your work. Spinning is one thing, when all you’re doing is channeling the vice or virtue directly into the thread, but making charms is another thing entirely.” She hated to give an ultimatum, but she felt she had no choice. “I won’t be able to train you properly while you’re wearing it. You’ll have to decide what’s more important: the bracelet or becoming a Spinster.”

Cassia glanced over her shoulder at the door before asking quietly, “How long do I have to decide?”

Lenore set the scissors down then carefully wound the loose yarn back around her spindle before sliding the whole bundle off the shaft. “I’m planning to go to the local village market on Sunday, where I’ll be offering charms. I think it would be good for you to decide by then, so neither of us wastes any more of our time.”

Cassia stared at her a moment longer before easing back down onto her seat and picking up her own spindle. “You’ll have my decision tomorrow.”

Lenore went to bed that night with a heavy heart, fearing that in pushing Cassia, she would push her away. But the young woman needed to understand that charms weren’t meant to be worn all day every day for ten years; that instead of giving her a boost, it would dominate her; that it was lucky she was still able to be sincere at all.

When she rose the next morning, Cassia’s door was open, and her room was empty. Lenore hurried down the stairs, hoping the young woman was in the kitchen, but that was empty, too. She set about making breakfast for two, hoping she was wrong, that Cassia hadn’t fled in the night, that she’d merely gone for a walk to weigh her options, that she would be back before the eggs were cooked.

If she *had* gone, well, nothing had changed. Lenore had her spindles back and could take some time to learn to be a Spinster again before she made another attempt to find an apprentice.

There was plenty of time, after all, and she was in no rush.

Lenore set the boiled eggs on the table, one on each side, along with some of yesterday's bread, sliced and toasted, then dropped into her seat and stared at Cassia's empty one.

She'd been alone for more than ten years, so why was this the first time she'd ever felt lonely?

The back door opened and Cassia stepped in, her expression as tight as her fist. Lenore's heart performed a series of complicated somersaults.

Cassia slipped into her seat. "Sorry I'm late."

"No need to apologize."

Cassia didn't lift her gaze as she slid her fist across the table, uncurled her fingers, and dropped her bracelet next to Lenore's plate. Before she could withdraw, Lenore caught her hand. Cassia's fingers twitched.

"I'm proud of you," Lenore said, giving what she hoped was a reassuring squeeze. "That couldn't have been easy."

Cassia flicked her gaze up to meet Lenore's briefly, and she shrugged. "It wasn't so hard." Then she extricated her hand. "So, do I get to stay?"

"Yes, of course you do."

Cassia's face broke into a wide grin, before she shifted her focus to her breakfast. "Perfect."

Lenore picked up the bracelet. The thread felt wrong in her hand. Cassia's bracelet had been rough and uneven, spun by a child with no experience. This one was smooth and consistent.

Cassia had lied.

Lenore wasn't surprised, but she was deeply disappointed.

She wanted to throw the thread across the table, demand Cassia admit the truth, and get the bracelet off once and for all.

Her fist closed around the thread.

But what if she was wrong? What if there was a reason Cassia had given her a fake? What if she'd taken the bracelet off but had accidentally mixed it up with some of the other thread? What if Lenore made a fool of herself by throwing accusations around and drove Cassia away for good?

Lenore stared at the thread. Self-doubt hummed through it. Which Cassia had been spinning the day before.

Lenore dropped the thread into her pocket where it would have less of an effect on her, but she was grateful it had reined in her initial urge to

confront Cassia. It would be simple enough to check if the young woman was still wearing the bracelet, and if she was, Lenore could sit her down and calmly request an explanation.

After they'd eaten, Lenore filled the farmhouse sink with warm water and asked Cassia to wash their few dishes while she cleaned up. She wiped down the table and watched as Cassia walked to the sink and rolled up her sleeves. First her right and then her left. Lenore squeezed her cloth like she was wringing a chicken's neck; she couldn't see.

Cassia reached for a plate, her arm clearly on view. It was bare. No bracelet encircled her wrist.

Lenore's lungs ached and she let out a long breath before taking her cloth outside to shake out the crumbs.

She'd found out the truth—or part of it—while avoiding a confrontation. But if Cassia wasn't wearing the bracelet, and she hadn't given it to Lenore, where was it?

CHAPTER EIGHT

EVERY VILLAGE THAT LENORE had ever visited had a green or a square or somewhere for the villagers to gather. Stagwell was no different. They arrived early on Sunday morning and set up the wagon next to farmers selling their produce, vendors selling food, and entertainers performing for gratuities.

“If we have no luck with the charms,” Lenore said, “you could always spin one of your stories.” She pointed across the square to where a woman dressed in a rainbow-colored jester’s outfit was juggling three beanbags for the amusement of half a dozen spectators.

Cassia studied the woman for a moment before laughing gently. “No, I don’t think anyone would want to hear my stories; they’d fall asleep from boredom.”

Lenore frowned at her apprentice. It was abundantly clear that something had changed in Cassia now that she was free from the bracelet’s effect. She was no longer the overconfident, canny young woman that had first shown up at Lenore’s house.

Initially, Lenore had been worried she’d broken something between them when she’d given Cassia the ultimatum, but Cassia didn’t seem to hold a grudge.

And she didn’t seem unhappy.

Lenore had feared that their trip to the gingerbread house, the failure to find Cassia’s sister, and the encounter with her parents had sucked some of the life from the young woman, she was merely more reserved. In the moments when she relaxed and dropped her shield, however, she was bright and curious in a way she hadn’t been before—or, at least, not that she’d let Lenore see.

She was also an excellent study. Lenore couldn't have asked for a more conscientious student. She listened carefully, followed instructions precisely, and learned quickly. Much more quickly than Lenore herself had.

Hopefully, as time went on and Cassia became accustomed to the bracelet's absence, she would find her own happy medium.

They spent half the morning selling balls of llama yarn and, occasionally, hats or shawls before they got their first request for a charm. A young woman approached them hesitantly, her hand held protectively over her swollen belly.

"Come, sit," Lenore said, offering the woman her chair. "How can we help?"

The young woman gazed at the collection of brooches and hair clips, introduced herself as Hilda, and told them her story. Upon discovering she was pregnant, and at the urging of the baby's father, she had agreed to wed. But each time he asked her to set a date to visit the village magistrate, she found herself offering up excuses.

"I need something to stop me being so indecisive. Can you help?"

"We certainly can." Lenore offered the gloves to Cassia.

She took them then turned her seat to face their customer, and placed a work tray on her lap.

"Do you want to marry him?" Cassia asked, reaching for a ball of confidence.

Hilda shrugged, her cheeks flushing as she rubbed at her belly. "I suppose I have no choice. How am I meant to care for a baby and keep a roof over our heads?"

Cassia's hand hovered over the collection of yarn, halfway between loyalty and its vice, obedience. "How do you support yourself now?"

"Oh ..." Hilda gave a self-deprecating laugh. "I make my own mead. Do all right selling it, too. Though Kurt says I'll have to give it up when we marry. It's how we met, you see. He's a meadmaker, too."

Cassia's hand shifted to grab a ball of ambition instead. "So he'll be able to support you by selling his mead?"

Hilda shrugged again. "Well, he hasn't had as much luck as me. Hasn't had the opportunities I have, you see. But once I stop, he'll be able to step in."

A flicker of disgust crossed Cassia's face, so fast that hopefully Hilda hadn't noticed, but Lenore had. The same feeling was stirring in her stomach.

"He's claimed the baby, though?" Cassia asked. "He'll do his duty?"

"Oh, yes, he's a good man."

Cassia plucked a ball of rashness then boastfulness and finally some spirit.

Lenore swallowed a murmur of approval; she didn't want to interrupt.

"What do you like about meadmaking?" Cassia asked, unwinding a length of boastfulness.

Hilda practically glowed as she spoke of bees and honey, fermentation and aging, and the satisfaction of seeing happy customers imbibing her brew.

Cassia started to work, commenting every now and then to show she was listening, knotting the thread, switching from one yarn to another, weaving two or three together. She hummed gently, helping the virtues and vices blend with each other, making them stronger than the individual threads alone.

When she broke the last strand, a beautiful silver bee sat on her palm.

She studied the different brooch backings and clips, but in the end found a simple leather cord, strung the charm onto it, and offered it to Hilda.

"It's beautiful," Hilda murmured, slipping the cord over her head and letting the charm rest again her skin. "How much?"

"As much as you think it's worth," Cassia said.

Hilda dug in the purse tucked against her hip and handed over a silver coin. "Thank you."

Cassia pulled her gloves off one finger at a time as she watched Hilda stroll away, her head held high.

"That was excellent work," Lenore said, patting Cassia's shoulder.

"Really?"

"I couldn't have done better myself. Although, you can't always give people what they need. Sometimes, you have to give them what they want."

Lenore dropped back into her seat and studied her apprentice. She'd taught Cassia the basics of knotting as they'd worked to replace the charms she'd sacrificed to the giant and to start building a collection of generic ones to sell. But to create a bee with no prior plan, to blend the magic that

seamlessly, was something that couldn't be taught. It needed to be *learned*. Over time. Starting with two different threads then three then four.

Starting with five was overly ambitious. Succeeding with five was ridiculous.

Yet succeed she had, and Cassia didn't seem to realize what a monumental achievement it was.

She'd done in days what had taken Lenore *years*.

"How did you know how to do that?" she asked.

Cassia's eyes bulged, as if Lenore had accused her of something. Maybe she had. "I just ..." Cassia's gaze flicked in the direction Hilda had gone, but the meadmaker was no longer in sight. "I did what felt right."

Cassia didn't need to be anyone's apprentice. She was already a master. There was nothing Lenore could teach her that she couldn't feel out for herself.

Lenore had only just gotten her spindles back, but it was already time to pass them on.

THEY WERE BUSIER IN the afternoon, selling charms to all sorts of people from the village and the surrounding farms. Every time anyone asked the price, Cassia always replied, "As much as you think it's worth," and sometimes she would get a copper or two, other times a silver, and on one occasion, a live chicken.

Mid afternoon, they packed everything away and Lenore took Cassia to the seamstress where they ordered some trousers, skirts, and blouses. They would return later in the week to pick them up. As they were walking back across the square, a familiar voice rang out.

"Lenore! Fancy seeing you here."

Lenore winced then plastered on a smile and turned to where Marika and Rowena were seated at a small table, an array of llama wool products displayed in front of them. Marika was waving vigorously.

"Friends of yours?" Cassia asked brightly.

"Associates."

Not wanting to be rude, Lenore wandered over to greet the women and made introductions.

"Things are going well?" she asked.

“Couldn’t be better, thanks to you,” Marika gushed.

Cassia’s hand drifted over the products: balls of beautifully dyed yarn, crocheted hats, knitted jerseys. If she was checking the wool, she wouldn’t find any virtues or vices. It was all pure llama. She paused at a neatly folded cardigan, kneading the wool like she was making bread. In general, llama wool tended toward rough and sturdy, but treated right, it could be soft and cozy.

“How much?” she asked, her voice reverent.

Marika smiled. “I was going to charge a silver, but for a friend of Lenore’s, I’ll give it to you for seven coppers.”

Cassia hugged the garment to her chest as she fished around in her purse. She handed over a silver and refused any coppers in return. “It’s worth it,” was all she said.

“Would you join us for a quick supper before we head home?” Marika asked.

Lenore was about to say no—they had their own journey to make—when Cassia replied, “We’d love to.”

They waited while Marika and Rowena packed their gear into two baskets, which they carefully balanced on their llama’s back. Most of the market stalls had gone, or were in the process of leaving, so they made their way to one of the local eateries that was little more than a shop front with a few tables strewn outside. It specialized in different meats and vegetables threaded onto skewers and cooked on a hot plate.

Between them, the women ordered half a dozen varieties and sat down to feast.

Lenore had to admit it was enjoyable, talking and laughing and trying not to burn their fingers or their lips. The meat was tender, the vegetables crisp, and the different sauces and spices ranged from sweet to sharp. And it was the first time in days that Cassia truly came to life.

Although Cassia had a talent for spinning, and probed Marika and Rowena for techniques and tips, food was clearly her passion. With a single bite she could identify the spices flavoring the meat, and she was free with her critique. Less cinnamon. More cumin. A touch of rosemary. Too much salt.

When they got home, Lenore would have to try harder in the kitchen. Or maybe let Cassia take over, if she enjoyed cooking as much as eating.

Lenore was beginning to dream of all the new recipes they could try when she remembered that Cassia wouldn't be around for long. Or, more rightly, Lenore would have to leave. Her appetite waned, and she set her half-eaten skewer back on her plate.

Cassia licked her fingers, wiped them on a napkin, and pulled a small ball of yarn out of her pocket. Before Lenore could stop her—it was the second time Cassia had caught her off guard—she held it out to Marika. “Have you seen anything like this before?”

“It's beautiful.” Marika took the yarn and ran it between her fingers before handing it to Rowena. “Very finely spun.”

Rowena held it up, letting the thread catch the evening light. “It's almost silver.” Her gaze shifted to Lenore. “Is it from your llamas? They had a silvery tinge.”

“It is.” Lenore felt that wasn't too much to admit.

Rowena's voice softened. “My fingers are tingling like I've brushed up against poison oak.”

Marika's expression creased with worry, and she took the yarn from her wife and said, “I don't feel anything,” before handing the ball back to Cassia.

“It won't hurt you,” Lenore assured them.

“No, I don't suppose it will,” Rowena said, in a way that suggested she knew exactly what she'd been holding in her hand.

When customers came to Lenore, they talked about needing help, needing *something* to solve a problem. They didn't call it magic and neither did she. She would talk about charms and trinkets and tokens but not spells or enchantments. After all, she was a Spinster, not a witch.

“We've heard the rumors, you know,” Marika said, exchanging a look with Rowena. “And it makes no difference to us, as long as you're doing right by people.”

Cassia rolled the ball of yarn between her hands, and though her gaze was on Rowena, her words were directed at Lenore. “Could they learn to do what you do?”

Lenore hesitated before saying, “It doesn't work like that. I already have an apprentice.”

Rowena reached over to thread her fingers through Marika's. “I wouldn't accept, even if I had the choice,” she said, which implied the rumors they'd

heard had carried some truth about a Spinster's vow.

"Well ..." Marika let out a groan as she stood. "We really should be going if we want to make it home before dark. Come, my love."

The four women headed back across the square together as the evening sun hung low, painting the sky with swathes of pink and purple.

"You really must visit us soon," Marika said, shifting her gaze to include both Lenore and Cassia. "We'd love to talk more about llamas and spinning and ... and magic—"

"Magic!" a rough voice called from behind them. "Is that what this is?"

Lenore spun around. She didn't recognize the man following them, but she recognized the charm dangling from his fist on a leather cord. It was Hilda's bee, which meant this had to be her baby's father, Kurt.

"That's not yours." Cassia stepped toward him, her fists clenched.

Lenore lurched forward to grasp her arm. If only they'd been closer to the wagon, she could have grabbed her cudgel. She didn't want to hurt this man, but she would defend herself and her friends.

"Did you put a spell on her?" Kurt asked, shaking his fist, making the charm bounce around. "Is that why she left me?"

"If she left you," Cassia said, "it was because she realized she deserved better."

"But we were going to be a family." Anguish twisted his voice, and Lenore's tension eased. He was more upset than angry, and she doubted his emotions would lead to violence; he merely wanted answers.

"No one should be a prisoner," Cassia said, taking another step forward and shaking off Lenore's hold. "No one should be chained, not by someone else's proclaimed love, and not by a feeling of duty. Hilda might be carrying your baby, but that doesn't mean you have any right to her."

Behind Kurt, Hilda was running awkwardly across the square toward them. To Lenore's great relief, she appeared unhurt.

"But I love her!" Kurt wailed.

"But you don't respect me," Hilda said, panting as she drew up beside him. "And I respect myself too much to settle for that."

Kurt turned to her, shame flicking across his face before it twisted back into rage. "But the baby—"

"You can still be a father without being a husband."

Kurt pulled his fist back. Lenore tensed, readying herself to move, knowing she was too far away. He threw the charm so it smacked against Hilda's swollen belly. She caught the tangle of leather cord. And then Cassia slammed into Kurt, knocking him to the ground. She straddled his chest, pinned his arms with her knees, and clenched his hair between her fingers. Then she drew a long dagger from her boot and held it to his throat.

Hilda gasped.

Lenore froze.

"Don't you get it?" Cassia growled, her voice more frantic than angry, as if she was desperate for him to understand. "Your love is useless against your jealousy and resentment. You would make a terrible husband, and if you don't start thinking about someone other than yourself, you're going to make a terrible father, too."

"No, I—" Kurt's gaze darted to Hilda, and he began to babble. "I'm sorry. I love you, but if you don't love me back, that's fine."

"Cassia ..." Lenore said, hoping to stop this before it went too far.

Cassia ignored her. "You've got a chance to redeem yourself. This baby could grow up with a father who puts other people before himself—"

"Cassia ..." Lenore walked in front of her.

"—who does the right thing, who doesn't take the coward's way, who fights even when the odds are against him—"

"Cassia!"

Cassia's gaze finally snapped up while her body remained hunched over Kurt.

"That's enough," Lenore said in the firm tone she used when she didn't want any nonsense from the unicorns.

Cassia's eyes shifted left, to where Marika and Rowena were huddled together, then right, to where Hilda stood, one hand holding the charm protectively against her belly, the other outstretched, and finally down to Kurt. She scrambled to her feet, muttered apologies as she backed away, then turned and ran.

"I'm sorry," Lenore said, helping Kurt to stand, hoping his rage didn't return, though she wouldn't blame him if it did. "She shouldn't have done that."

"No," he said, his expression embarrassed, "she shouldn't have."

“But she wasn’t wrong,” Hilda said firmly. “If you want to be a good father, you need to do better.”

Kurt glanced around the women before letting out a long sigh and turning to face Hilda. “You’re right. Of course, you’re right. I’ll try.”

LENORE FOUND CASSIA NOT far from the square. She almost drove the wagon straight past her, as her apprentice was sitting behind a tree, her back pressed against the bark, her knees pulled up to her chest.

Everyone had been a bit rattled. Hilda and Kurt had left together, walking side by side, talking softly. Lenore had high hopes things would work out for them. Marika had given herself a good shake, reminded Lenore of the open invitation to come to their house for a meal, then took Rowena’s hand and headed across the square.

Even Lenore had found her hands shaking as she’d harnessed the unicorns to the wagon.

She pulled to a stop and climbed down to sit beside Cassia, who hugged her knees in tighter.

“Where did you get the knife?”

“It’s a dagger,” Cassia said, “and I got it at the gingerbread house.”

Some of the details of their panicked escape were burned into Lenore’s mind. Others were hazy, like smoke. But she did seem to recall Cassia holding a dagger at one point.

“I suppose I should be grateful you haven’t been more inclined to stab things before now.”

Cassia shuffled beside her, pulling herself into an even tighter ball. “I thought he was going to hurt her. I thought ... if I could explain ... if he would listen ... he’d understand ...”

Lenore tentatively slipped her arm around Cassia’s shoulders. The young woman tensed but didn’t pull away. “Me, too,” Lenore said. “But while I stood there, waiting to see if the threat was genuine, you acted. And I suppose overreacting is better than underreacting.”

“I never used to be like this,” Cassia murmured. “I’d never get angry or lose control.”

Lenore squeezed her reassuringly. “It will take time to adjust.”

They sat in silence for a moment, Lenore feeling pretty proud of herself for handling the situation so well. Then Cassia whispered, “Are you going to send me away?”

“What? No. Of course not. Why would I do that?”

“Because I’m not who you think I am.”

“I know who you are.”

“You do?”

Lenore turned to face her. “Of course. Removing your bracelet may have had an effect, but you’re still the clever, confident, caring young woman who first showed up at my barn, wanting to woo me for a duke—the duke!” Lenore had forgotten all about him. “Does he still think we’re on a journey together? Do you need to tell him how the wooing went? Do you think you can convince him I don’t want to marry anyone, let alone him?”

“I suppose?” Cassia said, her brow furrowing, as if she were imagining how that conversation would go.

“We could make a little charm to help you.” Lenore didn’t like using charms against people, but if the duke couldn’t be convinced, he might prove to be a determined suitor who would make Lenore’s life unpleasant. “A little apathy. A touch of obedience.”

Cassia’s expression deepened into a frown. “Use a charm against him? That doesn’t sound right.” She paused, and her tone brightened. “Was that a test?”

“If it was, you passed.” Lenore smiled softly. “Come on. Let’s get home. I think you should head back to the duke’s estate tomorrow, and when you get back, we might have another journey to make.”

CASSIA WAS GONE FOR three days, and Lenore found herself worrying that she might not return. She spent her time tending the unicorns, preparing the cottage for an extended absence, and restocking her yarn supplies for their journey. So it was with no small amount of relief that she watched Cassia stroll into the barn on the afternoon of the third day.

“Did it go well?” she asked.

Cassia was wearing the cozy woolen cardigan she’d bought from Marika and Rowena, and she played absently with the sleeve. “As well as could be expected.”

“I imagine he was disappointed.”

Cassia grinned. “He’s a duke. I doubt he’ll be short of potential wives.”

They left the next morning, first stopping in at the village to collect Cassia’s new clothes and a knapsack to hold them before heading west. The journey would take four days if they pushed hard, but Lenore was in no particular rush.

As they traveled, Lenore told Cassia every story about the Order of Spinsters that her mentor had told her. From their initial immigration into Fairmont, to dispersing through the realm, to passing their spindles down. Cassia listened attentively and was able to repeat the key facts when Lenore asked.

They spent each night in a village or hamlet, sometimes sleeping in the wagon, other times shelling out for an inn. They lingered in the mornings, selling both llama products and unicorn charms to refill their purses. On the third morning, Lenore told Cassia she had errands to run, but really, she wanted Cassia to have the chance to knot charms alone, without a mentor hovering over her shoulder.

Lenore did little more than wander down a street filled with shops. She bought bread and cheese and berries and nuts that they could eat for lunch on the journey, and sat outside a small tea shop where she treated herself to a cup of warm, milky tea.

The shop across the lane had a spinning wheel in the window, set up as if the spinner had only stepped away for a moment.

As Lenore gazed at it, an ache filled her chest.

For the past ten years, she’d spun llama fiber on non-magical spindles happily enough, confident she would eventually get her real spindles back. But once she passed them on to Cassia, she would never spin unicorn fiber again.

Having been deprived of them for so long, she couldn’t understand why the idea of giving them away freely could hurt so much. Especially not when she knew that Cassia would take good care of them.

Perhaps it was because she was permanently locking the door on this stage of her life. Maybe using a spinning wheel instead of a drop spindle would help to soothe her loss.

She’d never used a wheel before, but she was a hard worker, and she wasn’t so old that she couldn’t learn a new skill. After all, Marika and

Rowena were older than her and they'd moved across the realm without regret. Of course, they had each other. And she was all alone.

But that was the way she liked it.

Lenore sighed and set her tea aside. She found it couldn't wash down the unpleasant truths she was attempting to swallow.

She would miss her spindles, and the unicorns, and her farmlet.

She would miss being a Spinster.

And she had no idea what to do next.

LENORE AND CASSIA REACHED the sanctuary on the seventh day. It had been a hamlet once, when the exiles had first arrived. The small collection of shacks had since rotted away, and all that was left was a flat stone platform that had been their gathering place.

It felt as eerie as the last time Lenore had been here, over a decade ago, when she'd made her vows. Even Trifle and Custard stood silently, neither moving nor making their happy hums. She climbed down from the wagon, took the box of spindles from the back, and led Cassia to the platform.

Her throat constricted as she stood facing her apprentice. She wanted to hug the spindles to her, keep her vow this time, and never let them go.

But she *was* keeping her vow. She was passing the spindles on to someone who could use them and protect them better than she had.

She swallowed hard and repeated the words her mentor had said to her all those years ago. "Cassia, do you promise to keep these spindles safe, to use their magic wisely, and to pass them on when the time is right?"

A small furrow appeared between Cassia's brows. "Yes?"

Lenore stifled a sigh. "You have to say 'I do.' And you have to mean it."

"I do?" Cassia shook her head and set her shoulders. "I do."

"And do you promise never to let anything distract you from your vow, neither marriage nor children?"

"I do."

Lenore held the box out. "Congratulations. You are now a member of the Order of Spinsters."

Cassia stared at the box then glanced around. "That's it? Where are the others?"

“What others?” Lenore gave the box a wiggle, hoping Cassia would take it. “All the spindles are in here.”

“No. The other Spinsters.”

“I don’t know.”

“Why not? Why aren’t they here? Don’t they care that I’m joining?”

“No.”

“No?” Cassia took a step back, her face aghast. “Why not?”

“Spinsters work in solitude.”

“But it’s an *order*. Don’t you get together and have meetings, share knowledge, support each other?”

Lenore shook her head. “No.”

“But ...” Cassia’s gaze darted side to side. “But I can’t defeat Helene alone. Together, we might have a chance.”

“I don’t think she *can* be defeated.”

“Of course she can. And the Spinsters are the key. That’s why she took your spindles. She’s scared of what you can do. *Your* magic. I saw what happened when you put those charms on her. But alone you aren’t strong enough. We need *all* the Spinsters.”

Lenore adjusted her grip on the box. “I’m not a Spinster any longer.”

“What?”

“I’m out. You’re in. That’s how it works.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“I explained all this to you. I thought you understood.”

Cassia lurched forward and grasped Lenore’s hands where they held the box. “Didn’t you feel it when we worked the magic together? Imagine if fifty or a hundred Spinsters joined forces.”

“There aren’t fifty Spinsters.”

“Well, how many are there?”

“I’m not certain, but I think there were ten.”

“Ten? Ten! We need to recruit more. What about Rowena? She has the gift. I know you said—”

“We can’t recruit more. There’s only ever one Spinster for each set of spindles.”

“That’s *ludicrous*,” Cassia said. “We can share. We’ve *been* sharing!”

“That’s not how it works.”

“Why not?”

Lenore's breath caught. She didn't know why not. It was merely what she'd been taught. "It's always been that way in the Order."

Cassia strode across the platform, spread her arms, and spun in a circle. "Well I don't see any Spinsters here to enforce the rules."

"I'm sorry—"

"No. You know what? I thought you'd be the one to help me, but you're too caught up in your pointless rules, so I'll find someone else." She turned away again, hopped off the platform, and stormed to the wagon, leaving Lenore holding the box.

"You forgot your spindles," Lenore called after her.

Cassia grabbed her knapsack of clothes from the back of the wagon and slung it over her shoulder. "You keep them and your silly vows."

"But they're not mine any longer!"

Cassia snorted and kept storming. Lenore let her go, hoping she would walk off her fury and return to her senses before she got too far down the road.

AT THE DUKE'S SUMMER home, the weeks had fallen into a comfortable pattern. During the day, Cassia worked with Felicity and Waffles. She'd honestly expected the young girl to quickly tire of the animal, but her enthusiasm refused to wane.

They trained Waffles to walk nicely at Felicity's side without chasing after every distraction, to perform tricks including raising her front foot to shake Felicity's hand and lying down and rolling over on command, and to accept a saddle and tolerate her young rider.

Cassia taught Felicity how to trim Waffles' nails, brush her coat, and clean her stall. Her fleece was short, and Cassia was grateful the lesson on shearing could be delayed until the next spring.

In the evenings, during the hours between finishing work for the day and their late supper, Cassia and Grayson would head to the duke's library and pore over various records. As Grayson had surmised, the tax records revealed nothing helpful. They were from the previous autumn, and Cassia suspected Avalon had still been the witch's prisoner then. The census also proved fruitless, though she was rather delighted to find her own name.

Cassia Sawyer. Seventeen. Storyteller.

In the intervening years, she'd forgotten that was the occupation she'd given the official-looking man who'd knocked on their door.

From there, they picked documents at random, scrolling through them for any references to the witch, the gingerbread house, or Avalon.

"When did you first see the gingerbread house?" Grayson asked, from where he sat opposite her at the large table in the library, books spread in front of him.

"Ten years ago."

"Huh," he said.

"Huh what?"

"Listen to this: *Children lost in Ravenglove Forest. Upon return gave report of a witch fattening them up to eat. Claimed to have escaped by killing her. No trace of witch's house found. Determined to be a fabrication.*"

"What!" Cassia snatched the book out of his hands and spun it around to read the brief entry for herself.

"Look at the date."

Cassia stared at the notation then squinted in case she was reading the ornate script incorrectly. It stayed the same. "It's from twenty years ago." She met Grayson's gaze across the table. "How long has she been living there, preying on lost children?"

"And how many times has she been killed?"

"What is this book?" She flipped the pages shut to study the cover. It was blank. And the spine merely read: *The Chronicle, Volume 14*. She flipped forward again, to the latest entry. It was dated only a few days earlier. *Tree hunt settled at Ascot Grove. Three giants in attendance.*

The tree hunt. Three giants. Cassia was relieved there was no mention of her or Lenore.

But no matter how much she and Grayson read, they didn't find any clues about Avalon.

Every few days, the duke would summon Cassia to his study, where he would present her with a scenario he was facing: an entreaty from a village to clear more forest, a request to repair a road, a protest concerning a shared water pump. Some of them had been waiting months—or even years—for an answer, solution, or recommendation.

For the simple ones, His Grace would then proceed to explain the relevant law to Cassia, make a note of how it applied, and either grant or deny the requests. For larger, more complex problems, he explained that he didn't have the ability to make the decision on his own. As she was good with her letters, he sometimes had her draft a missive to his fellow dukes, explaining the situation and his recommendations and asking for their agreement.

Although she didn't garner any information that would help find her sister, she found the duke's responsibilities fascinating, and was rather glad that the heavy cloak of his rule didn't rest on her shoulders, as he barely seemed to be keeping up with the demands.

Every time she returned from visiting the duke, Grayson would suggest with increasing frustration that she confess the truth of her situation to His Grace and ask for his assistance. And every time, Cassia demurred. Being forthcoming with the truth still didn't sit easily with her, and she didn't want to risk the duke becoming outraged at her deception and sending her away.

One morning, when the duke summoned her, he had a map laid out on his desk. He leaned heavily on it as he asked, "How familiar are you with the geography of the Seven Realms?"

"Not very, Your Grace," she admitted as she studied the map. The United Duchies of Fairmont occupied the bottom left of the island. Morrovia sat to its north, and the much smaller Bretland on its right.

"This river," the duke said as he traced his finger over the vellum, "is one of our major trading routes."

The blue squiggle on the map came from the east coast, ran along Bretland's northern border then continued along the top of Fairmont until it stopped at a dot labeled *Langbern* which, if Cassia remembered correctly, was the city where the duke usually resided when he wasn't here, at his summer house.

The duke laid a series of checkers, each marked with a symbol resembling a house, just below the river in Bretland. "All this land is controlled by one liege."

"But—" Cassia stopped herself before she could protest. She was certain that the duke would already know what she was about to say.

"Go on."

“Do you mean to say that they control the entire river bank in Bretland?”

“That is exactly what I mean.”

“Do they control the river too?”

“They do.”

Cassia winced. That part of the river sat between Fairmont and the open sea. “That doesn’t seem smart,” she said, deciding not to hesitate this time. “What if they cut you off?”

“And indeed they have.” The duke placed another three checkers on the map, this time bridges on the river. “The previous liege lord built these bridges. Occasionally we would hear reports of taxes levied and passage denied, but in general, our ships and their cargo made it through unscathed.”

“But that’s no longer the case?” Cassia guessed.

“No.” The duke straightened and rubbed at his eyes. “A number of weeks ago, we received word that a new liege lady and lord had inherited the title and lands. There was quite a to-do, apparently. The Queen of Caveline was invited to the celebration.”

Cassia’s gaze drifted back to the map. Caveline was Bretland’s neighbor to the north.

“Was Your Grace or any of the other duxes invited?”

“No,” he said flatly.

“Oh,” Cassia murmured. Even to her, that sounded like an insult.

“Recently, our ships have been delayed or attacked, and now, one of the bridges has closed completely to traffic, forcing us to send the ships around the coast to Grenham and then transport the cargo to Langbern overland.”

The duke eased down into his chair. “We sent diplomatic missives to the lady and lord, inviting them to meet with us to discuss the matter.”

“They refused?”

“They accepted. The lord will arrive later today.” He gave her a thoughtful look. “I have to discover whether closing the bridge was an opening salvo in a pecuniary war or merely the mistake of a new, untested liege.”

Cassia was glad she wasn’t the one who had to figure it out. “How can I be of assistance?”

“The lord is about your age. You will attend dinner with us. You will find out this lord’s motivation and report back to me tomorrow.”

Cassia let out a strangled croak. “Your Grace?”

“You asked me to give you insights into ruling a realm. Don’t look so surprised that I’m granting your request. I’m not asking you to make the decision but to merely gather as much information as you can.”

“Why would this lord reveal their motives to me?”

“You have a way with people,” the duke said, and it was the nicest compliment Cassia had ever received. “I’m certain you’ll find a way to get him on side.”

CASSIA WENT STRAIGHT TO the stables to find Grayson. Felicity was in the stall with Waffles, brushing the unicorn and singing nursery rhymes, and the groom was keeping one eye on her while he prepared a horse in the next stall. Cassia paced back and forth as she explained the duke’s order in a fierce whisper.

“Hush now,” Grayson said in a soothing tone. “You’re spooking the animals.”

“Sorry,” Cassia said, leaning back against the wall and scrubbing at her face. “But how am I meant to figure out if this lord—or his wife—is a despot or a fool?”

“I hate to point out the obvious,” Grayson said, his eyebrow hitched to indicate he didn’t hate it at all, “but you’re rather the expert at spinning lies. I can’t think of anyone better to question his lordship and figure out what he’s really up to.”

Cassia groaned. “Please tell me you received a summons to dinner too, so I won’t be alone.”

Grayson winced. “Sorry, but me and Tobin and some of the others are going into Grenham to spend too many coins on good food and bad ale.” He paused and shifted uncomfortably. “I was going to invite you, but I guess there’s no point now.”

“Next time,” Cassia said absently, even though she didn’t know if she would still be here *next time*.

He nodded before glancing around and lowering his voice. “During lunch, we’ll sneak up to the library and I’ll teach you everything I can about Bretland.”

Cassia hoped against hope that she could learn enough about the neighboring realm that she would have something to talk about with the lord, maybe even impress him with her knowledge. After all, she was an expert at spinning lies; surely she could string the lord along enough to find out what she needed to know.

She was starting to feel a smidgen more confident until Grayson asked, “Do you speak Brettish?”

CHAPTER NINE

CASSIA APPROACHED THE DUKE'S dining room at a fast walk. Even with two maids helping her, it had taken longer to get ready than she'd expected. She was wearing a borrowed gown, jacket, and court shoes. Borrowed kohl outlined her eyes. Borrowed pins kept her hair artfully arranged so it cascaded down her back.

She paused in front of the door where the butler waited, took a breath to steady herself, and nodded.

He swung the door open, led her into the room, and announced, "Lady Cassette of Raven's Wood."

As far as Cassia was aware, Raven's Wood didn't actually exist. But for tonight, it was the name of her estate on the edge of Ravenglove Forest. Which would be fine as long as the Brettish lord wasn't an expert in Fairmont's geography.

The duke, dressed in trim black trousers and a fitted jacket with long tails, stood in front of the fireplace where a fire crackled to prevent a chill descending on the room as the warmth of the day faded.

He was speaking to the lord, who was as young as Cassia had been told. He was shorter than the duke and slim. His short brown hair shone red where the firelight hit it, his complexion was fair, and the start of a beard coated his jaw. His white shirt and gray trousers weren't ostentatious, but Cassia was certain that if she were to look closely, the stitching would rival the work done by the elves.

They glanced her way as she entered, and the lord did a surprised double-take before attempting to cover his reaction by ignoring her completely. She had no idea what in her appearance had caught his interest—maybe her kohled eyes—but that would certainly help her.

She glided across the room, doing her best to imitate the way Lady Eliza Pendleton had stalked toward Grayson on the night of the garden party.

“Lord Gregory,” the duke said, “please allow me to introduce a dear friend of mine, Lady Cassette of Raven’s Wood.”

Cassia offered the lord her hand, and he clasped it briefly. His skin was cool against hers.

“Lady Cassette,” the duke continued, “this is our esteemed guest from the Principality of Bretland, Lord Gregory of Huxford’s Gift.”

“Huxford’s Gift?” Cassia asked, realizing just in time that laughing would probably be considered an insult. “That’s an interesting name.”

“Indeed, my lady,” the lord said, a slight furrow between his brows. “But it used to be worse.”

He spoke Fairmian with barely an accent, which gave Cassia one less thing to worry about.

Grayson had told her that nobles loved to talk about themselves, especially when it made them feel superior to others. Cassia thought that concept wasn’t limited to nobles, but she took Grayson’s advice and opened the conversation with something to get the lord talking.

“You’ll have to forgive me. I’ve never had the pleasure of traveling to Bretland, but I’ve heard you have the most amazing delicacies.” Belatedly, she remembered to add, “My lord.”

“They do some amazing things with noodles, my lady,” Lord Gregory replied.

He didn’t continue, and Cassia tried a different topic. “Do you hunt, my lord?”

“I used to,” he replied, “but lately all my time has been spent on a pest eradication problem.”

“Your people must be pleased.” Unless the pests he was talking about were his people. She still had no clue what sort of lord he was.

“They’ll be relieved when we succeed. The problem seems to be spreading eastward.”

If it was *spreading eastward* it must have come from the west. She wondered if it was a veiled reference to Fairmont. Maybe the duchies were the pest he was attempting to eradicate. But the border between the two realms had remained stable for generations. No one was attempting any incursions, as far as she knew.

“What brings you to this fair city?” Lord Gregory asked. “I hope nothing chased you from your home in Raven’s Wood.”

Even in the lord’s pleasing tone, his words sounded like a threat. Cassia found she much preferred conversing with peasants. If someone had a problem with you, they told you to your face and didn’t say the opposite of what they meant.

Unfortunately for the lord, he’d met his match. Cassia found herself settling comfortably into the guise of Lady Cassette. “If it had, my lord, I’ve certainly run to the safest place. His Grace’s personal guard are always prepared to rise to the defense of His Grace’s friends, and the people’s army are always ready to swap their hoes and saws for bows and swords.”

Lord Gregory’s eyes narrowed, as if he couldn’t believe she’d threatened him right back. It was a bluff, of course. Cassia had no idea about the nature of Fairmont’s army, but it couldn’t hurt to present a show of strength.

The tension building in the room was broken by the footmen, who entered with dinner. The duke escorted Cassia to the table where he sat at the head. He offered her the seat at his right hand and Lord Gregory the one to his left, directly across from her. One footman stood next to each of them and presented their plates at the same time.

It contained the tiniest amount of food Cassia had ever seen. Thin wafers were stacked on top of each other, separated by lumps of something white—if she had to guess (and she did) she’d say it was fish—and drizzled in a creamy sauce. She wished she was back at the garden party so she could load up her plate with whatever she saw fit. She waited for the duke to start so she knew how to attack the dish. He used a tiny silver fork to pick up the top wafer and its garnish, and slid it skillfully into his mouth. Cassia pushed her long draping sleeves back, searched the array of cutlery beside her plate for the correct fork, and attempted to eat her first wafer daintily.

The lord was watching her, his frown deepening. For a moment she was mortified that somehow she’d offended him with her table manners, but his gaze wasn’t directed at her face. He was staring at her wrist. More accurately, he was staring at her bracelet. She set her fork down and hid her hands in her lap as she chewed.

“I’m sorry to have missed your inauguration,” the duke said idly, stabbing a stray piece of fish. (Cassia was almost certain now that it was fish.) “I hear it was a lavish affair.”

Lord Gregory's brows bounced as his gaze shifted to the duke. "Not at all, Your Grace. It was little more than paperwork."

"And what of Price Huxford? It's been years since I've heard from him. What made him finally decide to bequeath his title?"

Cassia fought to keep the surprise off her face. The duke hadn't mentioned that the previous lord was a prince. Did that mean this lord was a prince as well?

Lord Gregory was also fighting to control his expression. Though the duke's words had been gentle, there was as rebuke hidden in them, and the lord clearly knew it, too. He dropped his gaze. "I apologize on his behalf, Your Grace. Prince Huxford found himself otherwise engaged for the past few years, and we're only now beginning to rebuild his relationships."

Though the lord seemed sincere, Cassia wasn't so sure she understood his meaning. Did "otherwise engaged" mean the prince had been distracted by a romantic affair, laid low by an illness, or locked in a dungeon?

She finished her last wafer, set her fork down, and hoped more food was coming. Her hope was rewarded when the footmen exchanged their empty plates with the next course. An egg—too small to be from a chicken—lay in two halves on the plate. The yolk had been scooped out, mixed to a paste with a fragrant spice, and stuffed back in. The duke selected the next-smallest fork and placed one half of the egg into his mouth.

Cassia followed his lead. The spice warmed her tongue and made her nose tingle. Oh no. She couldn't sneeze. If she did, she'd spray half-chewed egg all over the lord, and that certainly wouldn't help inter-realm relations. Tears pooled in her eyes as she blinked furiously. She swallowed just in time and managed a delicate sneeze into her napkin. When she looked up, both men were looking at her in expectation.

"Sorry, did I miss something?" she blurted out.

"His lordship inquired as to whether you would like to get some air," the duke explained, before giving a subtle nod.

"Yes," Cassia said, "that would be ideal."

It seemed rude to exit before the meal was complete—and Cassia dearly hoped a more substantial course was coming—but Lord Gregory might drop his guard without the duke present, and it was clearly what His Grace wanted.

The lord rose from his seat, circled the table, and offered Cassia his arm. It seemed ridiculous to be escorted out like she was too delicate to walk unaided, but as it seemed to be something nobles did, she slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow. A valet hastened to open the dining room's patio doors, and they wandered out into the courtyard. Cassia shivered in the cool night air and wished she'd had the presence of mind to bring a cloak to throw over her thin jacket.

"What an interesting statue," Lord Gregory said, leading Cassia away from the house, past the footmen who were busy lighting lanterns, and toward the tall stone figure of a woman with a baby in her arms. "Do you know who the subjects are?"

Though Cassia had neither asked nor been told about the statue, she knew exactly who it represented. "It's the duke's wife, with their daughter. She died a few years ago, fighting a leviathan that attacked the coast not far from here."

Grayson had told her the story, one evening in the library. The sea serpent had been attacking ships off the coast and must have followed one into the harbor, where it became trapped when the tide retreated. Enraged, it launched itself up the beach, attacking anyone and anything in its path. The townsfolk did their best to fight it off until the duchess arrived with her soldiers, but even they couldn't best the beast. In the end, it was the duke's mother who had the idea to lure the leviathan to the cliffs and crush it under a rock fall.

They finally succeeded, but many lives were lost in the process, including those of the duchess, and the duke's parents.

Lord Gregory made a faint inhale, and Cassia would've missed the sound if they hadn't been standing in the quiet of the courtyard. "But break, my heart," he murmured, before his gaze shifted past the statue into the darkness. "Are there more?"

"One for each year of Felicity's life."

He led her around the statue and down the path to the second one. The lantern light in the courtyard didn't reach that far, and they only had the stars to light their way. Cassia blinked as her eyes adjusted. They moved onto the third statue and the fourth, pausing beside each. They were now as far away from the house as they would get, before the path circled back around. The stables loomed off to the right.

Lord Gregory placed his hand over hers, where it still rested on his arm. His fingers slid to her wrist. “Lady Cassette ...” he murmured.

Cassia suddenly remembered the strange look he’d given her when she’d walked into the dining room. Maybe being alone in the darkness with him wasn’t such a great idea.

She tried to pull her hand away, but his fingers tightened around her wrist and he turned to face her.

“What game are you playing?” he demanded.

Oh no. He hadn’t brought her here to make advances. This was much worse. He somehow knew the duke wanted her to discover his secrets. “I don’t know what you mean.” She let a little panic slip into her voice—certainly not a difficult performance—hoping to convince him she was an innocent noble and not a spy.

“By Godmother’s gown. We’re fighting trolls, and you’re busy infiltrating a duke’s house?” His grip on her wrist tightened, pressing her bracelet into her skin, and he gave her arm a shake. “Was it all an elaborate ploy? Did I fall for another trick? What would she have you do?”

His words were unfathomable. How did he know she was at the duke’s house under false pretenses, and why did he think Lenore had something to do with it?

“She doesn’t even know I’m here.”

Cassia grabbed his arm in an attempt to break his hold, but though he was slight, his grip was like the chain that had once bound her ankle: unbreakable. But if there was one thing Cassia had learned through storytelling, it was to *not* give people what they expected. Lord Gregory expected her to keep pulling away, so instead she lunged forward. She grabbed his shirt with her free hand, aimed her knee at his groin, and twisted her other hand sharply down to free it from his grasp.

He let out a curse as he attempted to recover. She didn’t wait to see his next move. She shoved him, turned, and ran for the stable house, where all the stable hands would be sitting around, laughing and waiting for dinner. Where *Grayson* would be.

She was almost there when the dark windows reminded her they’d all gone into Grenham.

She pivoted sharply toward the stables. At least they had more than one exit, and she might be able to find a weapon with which to defend herself. A

hay rake, or a hoof pick, or Waffles!

She dragged the heavy door open, wincing against the glow coming from the single lantern burning inside, and sprinted toward Waffles' stall. She was five paces away when she was tackled.

She hadn't even heard Lord Gregory running up behind her.

Cassia hit the ground hard, knocking the air from her lungs and leaving her defenseless and gasping in pain as he planted his knee in her back and caught her wrists.

Her chest throbbed like she'd been pierced by an arrow. Her head swam as she struggled to draw breath. She couldn't scream as she watched him flick a dagger out of a leather bracer on his wrist.

"The next time I find a girl trapped in the woods," he ground out, "I'm going to leave her there."

He thrust the dagger toward her hand. Cassia screwed her eyes shut and braced for the pain, but none came.

"Do you need help with an unwelcome admirer, Miss Cassia?" Grayson said from somewhere behind her. She'd never been so happy to hear his gruff tone, which sounded even darker than normal.

Managing a few shallow breaths, she twisted her head around to bring him into view and croaked out, "Please."

One of Lord Gregory's hands was still clamped around her arm, but the other was now holding his dagger loosely between one finger and thumb. "We appear to have reached a misunderstanding."

"Things look pretty clear from where I'm standing," Grayson said. "Drop the dagger."

Lord Gregory lowered the dagger to the ground then withdrew his hand. His grip on her arm loosened, and his weight disappeared from her back. Cassia pushed to her hands and knees and paused to take her first proper deep breath in what felt like a hour. Her gaze snagged on the dagger. It was a short blade with a handle of charred wood. She reached forward to wrap her fingers around the hilt. The weight on her palm felt familiar.

Lord Gregory was standing with his back to a post, his hands held up in surrender. Grayson had a muck fork aimed at his chest.

"Grab that rope and bind his hands behind his back." Grayson gave his head a flick to indicate which rope he meant without taking his eyes off the lord.

“That isn’t necessary,” Lord Gregory said.

“I disagree.”

Cassia ran to get the rope, setting the dagger aside, and the lord put his hands around the post willingly enough.

“Bind him tight, and once you’re done, go tell His Grace what happened. I’m sure he’ll want to know how his guest has behaved.”

Lord Gregory sighed. “I hate to do this, but if you insist on calling the duke, I’ll be forced to explain my behavior, and he’ll probably be quite interested to learn that Lady Cassette isn’t who she says she is.”

“Lady Cassette was a fiction invented by His Grace,” Cassia muttered as she looped the rope around the lord’s wrists.

“We all know her name’s Cassia,” Grayson added.

“Then she lied to one of us, because I know her as Avalon.”

Cassia’s hands fumbled. “Avalon?”

Grayson’s brows furrowed. “Your sister?”

Seizing on their distraction, the lord yanked his hands free of the untied rope, dodged the tines of Grayson’s fork, bounded *up* the stall wall, and swung himself into the rafters, where he perched on a beam and stared down at them, barely even panting from his sudden show of acrobatics.

“Did you see that?” Grayson asked, his jaw slack.

“How did you do that?” Cassia asked.

“Years of practice. Now, before you notify the duke, *Lady Cassette*, shall we have a chat?”

“Go—now!” Grayson said. “I’ll keep him here.”

Cassia turned to do Grayson’s bidding when a dagger thudded into the ground in front of her feet. She looked skyward.

Lord Gregory flicked another dagger into his hand. “I’m afraid I have to insist.”

“You’ll run out of knives eventually,” Grayson said, positioning himself between Cassia and the lord.

“Would you care to stake your life on that?”

Cassia bent down to pluck the dagger from the floor. It was identical to the first. She placed her hand on Grayson’s shoulder and stepped around him. He tried to block her with his arm, but she eased the barricade down.

“It’s all right,” she said. “He won’t hurt us.” She held up the dagger. “You were there, in the gingerbread house.”

He threw up his hands. “Of *course* I was there. So were you. We had a rather exciting adventure.”

“I *wasn't* there. The person you met was my sister.”

“Funny, because you look exactly like her.” He paused and let out a curse. “Twins?”

“Yes.”

He winced and rubbed at his temples. “If that really wasn't you, then that throws our conversation in the dining room into an entirely different light. What did you think I was trying to tell you?”

“What *were* you trying to tell me?”

He sighed, flicked his dagger back into his bracer, and plopped down to sit on the beam, his feet dangling. Cassia clutched Grayson's arm, afraid the lord would fall, but he kept his balance with ease. “Let's start again,” he said. “I'm Rory.”

“Not Lord Gregory?”

“No one calls me Gregory. But Ella thought ‘Lord Rory’ didn't sound impressive enough and I wasn't willing to argue. And you are?”

“Cassia. And this is Grayson.”

“Who's Ella?” Grayson asked.

“My wife, the liege of Huxford's Gift.”

“I thought *you* were the lord of Huxford's Gift,” Cassia said.

“Lord consort.”

“What does that mean?”

“I married well. Look, I imagine we don't have much time before His Grace loses patience with our absence, so I'm going to give you the short version. A little under a month ago, Ella and I went to the gingerbread house on our honeymoon—”

“You went there willingly?” Cassia gasped.

“If your father-in-law slept at the foot of your bed, you'd take any opportunity for privacy too. But that's not the point. When we realized that Avalon was a prisoner, we offered to help her escape.”

“Why?” Grayson asked.

The lord's face darkened, but not at the interruption. “Avalon isn't the only person that Godmother's held prisoner.”

“Godmother?” Cassia asked. “You mean Helene?”

Lord Gregory nodded. “She agreed to release Avalon if we completed three seemingly impossible tasks.”

The memory of her encounter with the giants rushed Cassia in a torrent. Suddenly that strange conversation made some sense. “Did one of the tasks involve stealing a hair from a giant’s beard?”

“Yes.”

Cassia stared up at the lord, reevaluating what she knew of him. Rory did suit him much better in this relaxed guise. “You’re the rogue.”

“Indeed.” He rubbed his jaw. “And to sum up, we completed the tasks, and Avalon was freed—”

Hope blossomed in Cassia’s chest. Though she had no particular reason to believe his story, it was the confirmation she needed. Avalon was alive and out there somewhere.

“—but have you ever done something you thought was the right thing at the time but doubted yourself later?”

Cassia’s hope wilted like a spring bloom caught by a late frost. “Why do you say that?”

“I’m afraid she’s rather set on destroying Godmother.”

“But the witch can’t be killed.”

“That’s what worries me.”

“Do you know where Avalon is?”

Rory shook his head. “I’m sorry, I don’t. We didn’t part on great terms. If you want to find her, your best chance might be to draw her out. Spread the word about where *you* are, and give her a reason to come to you. Then you might be able to talk her out of whatever plan she’s concocting.”

That made sense. Cassia could spend the next ten years searching the realm for Avalon and never cross her path. But she had no idea what she could do that would make Avalon come to her.

“Thank you,” she murmured. “You can probably come down from there now.”

Rory’s gaze shifted to Grayson, who was still aiming his fork at the rafters. “I really don’t like getting stabbed.”

Grayson looked at Cassia, as if he wasn’t quite so willing to believe the lord’s story. She gave him a reassuring nod, and he set the fork against the stable wall. “For someone who doesn’t like getting stabbed, you’ve got a lot of scars.”

“That’s how I know I don’t like it.” Rory swung down from the rafters, balanced on top of the stall wall, and pointed into Waffles’ stall before dropping to the floor. “Why do you have a unicorn in with your horses?”

“A unicorn?” Grayson asked, giving Cassia a perplexed look.

“I’ll explain later,” she said, as she took his hands. “Thank you so much for helping me. I thought you were in Grenham.”

“I felt bad about leaving you to have dinner with some petulant lord, so I told the others to go without me.”

He looked toward Rory, who muttered, “I’m not petulant.”

“Why were you attacking her?”

“I wasn’t attacking her. I mean, I was, but in my defense, I thought she knew who I was, and I was only trying to get the bracelet off. Not that I held much hope of that. Unicorn thread is tough.”

“You recognized it for what it was?”

He nodded. “I thought Godmother might’ve put it on you—er, Avalon—after we’d parted ways, or worse, that Avalon had done it to herself as part of her plan.”

“In truth, I did put it on myself, years ago, and I’ve been unable to remove it.”

“Avalon found a pair of scissors that did the trick, but I don’t know what happened to them.”

Cassia glanced at Waffle’s stall, remembering the way the animal had bitten through the chain at the gingerbread house, the way the magic had drained out of it so the witch could no longer control it. She’d never considered the same might work for her bracelet. Now she had to decide if she wanted to try. It would be strange not to feel it against her skin after all these years.

“What happens now?” Grayson asked.

“Now, I return to the dining room, hope I haven’t offended His Grace by my absence, and try to figure out how to avoid starting another war.” He shook his head. “Diplomacy was never my strong suit, but Ella has intermittent rage issues, which have flared up lately, so I was the only choice.”

“You won’t have offended him,” Cassia said. “He’ll believe we’ve spent the time talking, which we have, because he wanted me to discern whether

the reason you've blocked our supply route was due to malice or incompetence."

Rory winced. "*That's* what this is all about?"

"Well, you did offend him slightly when you didn't invite him to your inauguration."

Rory groaned. "It wasn't an inauguration. It was our wedding. And we were too busy trying to prevent a war between Caveline and Bretland to consider inviting anyone from the other realms. I should've known better."

"So should I tell the duke that you're merely incompetent?"

"You certainly can't tell him the truth."

"Which is?"

"One of our impossible tasks involved retrieving a nose hair from a troll. Some of the trolls took a liking to me, found me in Bretland, and have made their homes under our bridges."

"When you said pests, you meant *trolls*?"

"Indeed." Rory scratched at his jaw. "I don't want him to think we're incompetent, but a bit of youthful inexperience wouldn't be so bad. He'll assume we'll grow out of that. I'll apologize, tell him we were doing improvements that went awry and blocked the river. We'll get it cleared up soon enough."

Grayson grabbed the lantern to escort them back to the manor house. "Maybe if you admitted the truth, His Grace could help."

Rory shook his head. "I don't think the Grand Prince of Bretland would appreciate us turning to another realm."

"Would he help you instead?" Cassia asked.

"Of course. He's a good man, and he's already been apprised of the situation. Plus, I'm friends with the Prince Consort."

"What's up with this 'consort' business?" Grayson asked.

"It's a Brettish thing," Rory explained. "They like to differentiate between inherited titles and those claimed via marriage."

"You're not Brettish, then?"

Rory's expression fell. "Um ..."

"Weren't half the Cavelian kings named Gregory?" Grayson pressed.

Even in the orange glow of the lantern light, Rory's visage seemed to pale. He'd done much better avoiding the tines of Grayson's fork than his pointed questions. "I'm sorry, my lord," he said stiffly, though it should've

been obvious that Grayson wasn't a lord, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

In a slightly awkward silence, they returned to the dining room to finish their meals.

Cassia imagined the poor kitchen staff would have been in a panic trying to keep the food on hold for so long without it turning soggy, drying out, or burning.

As they made their way through delicious course after delicious course, Cassia started to droop. Her head was filled with dreams of her bed when the duke invited Rory—it was amazing how quickly she'd stopped thinking of him as "Lord Gregory"—for a night cap in his study. When His Grace bid her good night, he gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek and whispered that he would speak to her in the morning. At least she knew what she needed to tell him.

When she stepped outside, yearning for the moment she could remove her gown, she found Grayson waiting to escort her to the stable house.

"You didn't have to stay," she said.

He shrugged, holding a lantern aloft. "I wanted to make sure you were all right."

"I was fine. Rory's a friend. Or at least, not an enemy." She took his free hand in hers. "But thank you."

"I—" He paused, his hand massaging hers then he stopped and turned to face her. "I know you can look after yourself. That's pretty clear, so don't think I'm saying otherwise, but you shouldn't have *only* yourself to rely on."

Cassia studied him for a moment, fighting to force the words out around the lump in her throat, fighting her instinct to make a flippant comment or tell an outrageous lie. Finally, she murmured, "I've never had a friend I *could* rely on. Until now."

She felt like she'd opened her chest and exposed her tangled insides. Since she'd lost Avalon, she'd never let anyone mean anything to her. Since she'd lost faith in her parents, she'd never let herself be vulnerable with another person. If Grayson mocked her openness, discarded her offer of friendship, or even worse, took advantage of it to satisfy his own desires, she wasn't sure she'd ever be brave enough to try again.

But he did none of those things. Instead, he smiled at her softly and said, a little shyly, “I won’t let you down.”

Then they walked the rest of the way to the stable house, climbed to the still-empty loft, and settled into their own cots. Cassia lay facing the curtain, knowing he was just on the other side of it, and had her best night’s sleep in years.

CASSIA STOOD IN THE stables the next morning, dressed in her hard-wearing peasant clothes. They were more suited to the environment than last night’s gown had been, but today they left her feeling underdressed. Grayson stood beside her, his arms crossed, his brow furrowed, watching Felicity brush Waffles while chattering happily.

“Is it really safe to let her that close to a unicorn?” he asked under his breath.

He’d taken the unicorn revelation in his stride, as he did most things, Cassia had realized.

“It’s fine,” she said, oozing confidence. “Waffles clearly likes it.”

In all honestly, she’d never seen a unicorn kept as a pet. They could be fierce—Waffles had shown that when she’d saved them from the witch—but they weren’t wild, and the contented humming coming from the animal suggested she enjoyed the attention very much.

Grayson made an unhappy hum of his own. “If I get skewered, I’m blaming you.”

“Treat her with respect, as you would any lady, and she won’t treat you like a pincushion.”

He muttered something about ladies bossing him around as he wandered away to finish preparing Rory’s horse for his journey back to Bretland.

Cassia draped her arms over Waffles’ stall door. Felicity had tied the first of a dozen bows into the fleece on the unicorn’s neck, and as she turned to grab a second one, Waffles trotted forward to sniff and lick Cassia’s fingers. When the animal started to nibble at her bracelet, Cassia pulled her hand out of range.

She didn’t *need* to take the bracelet off. Despite Lenore’s warning about its nature, she’d found it easier and easier to tell the truth to Grayson, and

being able to spin yarns was certainly a benefit. She wouldn't be here, working for the duke, without that skill.

She'd do it as soon as she found Avalon, as soon as she had no need to pretend to be someone she wasn't, as soon as all this was behind her.

The duke arrived with Rory a short while later. This time, it was Cassia's turn to do a double take. Instead of fine clothes, Rory was dressed in utilitarian black. He came to stand beside her at Waffles' stall.

"Lady Cassette," he said.

"Lord Gregory." It felt strange to call him that now, but with the duke so close, they couldn't speak as freely as they had last night. "Nice outfit."

"I find people are less inclined to attack me on the road if I look as if I'll attack them first."

"Best of luck with your pest problem."

"I'm sorry I couldn't be more helpful regarding your inquiries last night." He adjusted the buckles on his bracer. It was obvious, now that he was wearing a vest and not shirtsleeves, that he had only one. His other forearm was bare, and Cassia wondered briefly why he didn't have a matching pair. "If you're ever in Bretland, feel free to visit. Huxford's Gift is well known and easy to find."

"Thank you." She reached into the pocket of her skirt, where she'd hidden the ring the giant had given her, and held it out. "I believe you dropped this, my lord, when we were on our walk last night."

Rory inhaled sharply, and his fingers trembled as they closed around the ring. "I owe you a debt."

"You've already paid it by helping my sister."

Grayson brought the lord's horse over, and Rory bid everyone farewell as he rode out of the stables. Cassia couldn't imagine she'd ever visit Bretland, but if she did, she would definitely look him up.

"Walk with me," the duke said.

Cassia fell in beside him as they strolled outside and around the same statues she'd passed last night.

"Tell me," he said, "what is your opinion of Lord Gregory?"

"You don't have anything to worry about, Your Grace. The trouble with the bridge wasn't a deliberate act of malice. He and his wife are merely experiencing the teething problems of being the new liege lady and lord."

"Are you certain?"

“Yes. The lord is a terrible liar, so if they were attempting something devious, he wouldn’t be able to hide it.”

She felt a twinge of guilt at both misleading the duke and disparaging Rory, even though he’d asked her to.

“How did you ascertain all that?”

Cassia shrugged. “Going for that walk last night helped. I think he was awed by your presence, but once he relaxed he was quite forthcoming. I think he and his wife will make good allies, once they’ve had a chance to settle in.”

“If they stop blocking our ships, I’ll consider it.” They had completed a loop and made it back to the stables before he continued. “You did excellent work last night. I put you on the spot and you went out of your way to oblige me. I said I needed a month to consider your proposal, but I think these past two weeks have given me all the information I need.”

Cassia held her breath, trying to tamp down the hope that threatened to engulf her.

“Papa! Papa!” Felicity cried, leading her unicorn toward them as Grayson trailed behind her. “Look how pretty Waffles is.”

The duke turned to her and smiled. “She looks splendid, my darling. You, on the other hand, are a tad disheveled.” He reached over to pluck a stray stalk of hay from his daughter’s hair before planting a kiss on her forehead.

“Can I show you how good I can ride?”

“How well,” he corrected her. “But, of course.”

Cassia’s patience was stretched as tight as a cinch on a saddle as she waited while the duke lifted Felicity onto Waffles’ back, and watched as the young girl guided the animal around the yard in a large circle.

“Excellent work,” the duke called.

“Can I ride to the ruins and back?”

“Yes, but not on your own.”

“I’ll go with her, Your Grace,” Grayson said, stepping up beside them.

“Thank you, but I think I’ll go myself. I could do with a ride.”

“I’ll ask Hana to prepare your horse.”

“Tell one of the others to find her,” His Grace said. “I have an announcement which you should be here for.”

Grayson frowned but quickly ordered one of the stable hands to find the stable master, as no one else was permitted to touch the duke's horse.

His Grace turned to Cassia. "You have done excellent work with Waffles. I expect Felicity now knows more about caring for her llama than anyone else in the realm, and she is clearly an adept rider. It seems clear to me that she no longer requires your assistance."

Cassia's heart fell, but she wasn't going to give up without an argument. "Your Grace—"

He stopped her with the look of someone who didn't tolerate interruptions. "And last night made it clear that you are far too valuable to spend your days in the stables."

Cassia winced inwardly, not daring to look Grayson's way, not wanting to see if the duke's careless words had hurt him.

"If you would not disagree to a small amendment to our arrangement, I would offer you the role of my under-steward. You're young, with a lot to learn about the running of a duchy, but you have potential that could be fulfilled with the right mentor. What say you?"

Cassia's mouth had fallen slack, and it took a concerted effort to say anything at all. Even with all her plans and schemes, she'd never imaged she would be given the chance to learn how to run a realm, to rise above her station and become one of the duke's closest servants. Not that she knew what an under-steward was. Or a steward, for that matter. But she could tell it was an important and influential role, one far above her beginnings as a woodcutter's daughter. "I would be honored, Your Grace."

"And as to the second part of your proposal, I grant permission. I can think of no one who would make a better wife for our Grayson."

A strangled croak came from beside her. It echoed the one Cassia could feel in her own throat.

She needed to tell the duke that he had it wrong, that she didn't want to marry Grayson, that she only wanted him to be free to marry whomever he pleased.

But she would look like a fool.

And before she could force any words out, the duke clasped both their hands, and his voice softened. "Sometimes I feel as if a pall of grief still hangs over this family. Ever since we lost my dear Maleena ... our parents ... so many of our subjects ... I have felt deprived of joy. I think it may be

time to find it where I can.” He blinked rapidly before looking up, a little abashed. “We’ll set the wedding for two weeks hence. That should give us plenty of time to prepare.”

Hana—the stable master—appeared then, leading the duke’s horse.

He pulled himself into the saddle and gazed down at them, a childlike grin on his face. “We’ll talk more about the arrangements tomorrow, but for now, you two may take the afternoon off in celebration.”

Cassia watched the duke as he rode toward Felicity. She couldn’t bear to face Grayson because she had no idea what how to explain this. But the weight of his presence made her turn.

His arms were crossed tight, his fingers digging into his biceps. His jaw was set, his lips a thin line. But his eyes were the worst. He looked betrayed.

“I know I’m not the most eloquent person, but can you please tell me what I said or did that made you think I saw you as anything other than a friend.”

“I don’t think that.”

“Then why—” The betrayal spread from his eyes across the rest of his face. “I’m such a fool. Things changed after I told you who I was. That’s when you started being friendly. The duke’s brother was the perfect person to help you sneak into the library, and marrying me is the perfect way to ingratiate yourself into the duke’s service.”

“That’s not what happened,” she protested.

“Please don’t lie to me.”

Something precious in Cassia’s chest curled up and died, something she hadn’t known had even taken root. “I don’t lie to you.”

“Maybe that’s technically true, but leaving out the fact you asked His Grace for my hand in marriage seems like a giant omission.”

“I didn’t!”

“Didn’t what?”

“Ask for your hand.”

His brows pinched. “You didn’t? Then why does he think you did?”

She threw her hands up. “I don’t know.”

Grayson lifted his gaze to the sky and let out a sigh. “Come on,” he said, before turning and starting to walk away.

“Where are you going?” she asked, chasing after him.

He glanced back as he kept walking. “Since we’ve got the afternoon off, we may as well make the most of it. I know a great tavern we can visit while you tell me the whole story. From the beginning. Without leaving any important bits out.”

CHAPTER TEN

THE TAVERN SAT AWAY from the waterfront, tucked beneath the cliffs that protected the town's back. High ceilings made the building feel larger than it was, and it was half-full of patrons imbibing both food and drink.

Grayson ordered a flagon of mead, and they sat facing each other at the quiet end of a long table. He filled two mugs with the amber liquid, and said, "Talk."

"It happened when I returned with Waffles."

He shook his head. "No. It began earlier than that. Lenore isn't a close family friend, is she?" When Cassia shook her head, he continued, "Did you steal that llama—unicorn—from her? Did you know it was a unicorn the whole time? Does Felicity know?"

Cassia counted his questions off on her fingers. "No. Yes. And I think so, that's why she called it 'special', which most people wouldn't do."

"Then how did you get it?"

"I told you how Waffles saved us from the witch, and after Lenore and I parted ways, Waffles followed me. So I brought her here." She paused, thinking about how the unicorn had followed her. "I think she's happy. She'd leave if she wasn't."

He chewed that over for a moment before nodding for her to continue.

"When I returned with Waffles, His Grace offered me a thousand gold coins—"

Grayson's eyes bulged. "He really wanted that unicorn."

"But I counter-offered. For half the money, he would take me into his employ. I thought that might give me the chance to get more information about Avalon or the witch."

"And the other half?"

Cassia dropped her gaze. “I remembered what you’d told me about Lady Eliza Pendleton. You seemed so *resigned*.”

“What did you do?” he asked, his tone more gentle than she deserved.

“I asked that you be free to marry whomever you pleased.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.” He frowned as he sipped at his mead.

“What did you say exactly?”

“Exactly?” Cassia struggled to remember. “I asked him to let you choose who to marry. He asked if I was offering the coins as a dowry, and I said yes.” Grayson’s face paled. A terrible sick feeling twisted Cassia’s stomach, and it wasn’t from the mead. “Was that the wrong thing to say?”

“Do you know what a dowry is?”

Cassia shrugged. “A gift? To buy you the freedom of choice?”

“It’s a gift all right, from a bride to her groom’s family.” He drained his mug and slammed it down on the table. “You asked his permission to marry me.”

“No, I didn’t! I didn’t say that at all!”

“Unfortunately, you were speaking to a noble. They have a secret language that’s ambiguous and indirect. When conversing with each other, they speak volumes in the pauses between words, they’re polite when they’re furious, they say one thing but know it means another.” As he spoke, his words grew more clipped until they were as pointed as the tines on his muck fork. “When you asked His Grace to let me choose who to marry, he heard that I already had someone in mind. And the fact that it was *you* asking on my behalf narrowed the list. He was surprisingly direct asking about a dowry, and you confirmed his suspicions because you were too leery to admit that you don’t know what a dowry is.”

He refilled his mug with a shaking hand and drained that, too.

“You’re so tangled up in lies, I’m surprised you’re not pretending to be in love with me. Or are you in love with me but pretending you’re not?”

Silence fell between them, so harsh it blocked out the noise of the other patrons.

She’d been stupid to think that Grayson was someone she could trust, that they could be friends. For ten years she hadn’t had anyone to rely on, and that wasn’t about to change now.

Grayson gazed into his empty mug. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

Cassia pushed up from her seat. "I have to use the outhouse. The mead's gone straight through me."

Grayson's gaze shifted to her mug, which she knew without looking was still full.

"Yes," she said. "*That* was a lie."

He didn't protest as she stormed across the tavern to the back door and out into a walled courtyard where she hoped to find an outhouse. But it was empty except for a single table surrounded by four mismatched chairs.

Four horrifyingly familiar mismatched chairs.

Cassia crept forward on wooden legs. She ran her fingers over the back of one of the chairs. It felt solid. Real. But that couldn't be.

"Tea?" Helene's voice came from behind Cassia.

She spun around and stumbled backward, crashing into the table so hard there was bound to be a bruise.

The witch stood before her, as young and beautiful as the last time Cassia had seen her. In her hands she held a tray bearing two delicate cups, a matching tea pot, and a jar of honey.

"No, thank you," Cassia said stiffly.

"As you wish." Helene set the tray on the table, settled into one of the chairs, and gestured for Cassia to join her.

Cassia stayed standing as Helene filled a cup for herself.

Seemingly in no rush, she stirred in a spoonful of honey, shook off the drips, and set the spoon aside. As she sipped at her tea, she eyed Cassia over the rim. "I hear you're in a bit of a predicament."

"I don't need your help."

"Really? You still haven't found your sister. The web of lies you've spun around the duke is about to fall apart. And that charmless young groom is one lie away from washing his hands of you."

"He's not charmless," Cassia muttered, though she doubted that Grayson would care a whit for Helene's opinion of him.

The witch smiled, like she'd beaten Cassia in a game that she didn't know they were playing. "I have the power to grant your wishes; you merely have to decide what to wish for. To find your sister? Secure your place in the duke's esteem? Marry your groom? Or maybe all three."

The hope of a perfect future floated in front of Cassia, like a carrot dangled in front of a stubborn llama. She wanted to find Avalon more than

anything, to prove that her hope hadn't been pointless all these years. And although working for the duke hadn't been a lifelong dream, that didn't mean she didn't want it now, to be more than a woodcutter's daughter who scraped a living by entertaining an audience with her lies.

But Helene was wrong about Grayson.

Despite telling herself, only a moment ago, that she didn't need him, Cassia knew it was a lie. Her life was better with him in it.

She was better.

She loved the gruff groom, but not in *that* way. Forcing him to marry her—or anyone—would lead to a life of misery.

And if the witch was here, offering to make her dreams come true, Cassia was absolutely certain those were the last things she should wish for.

“What would you want in return?” she asked, using all her storytelling skills to sound bored and mocking. “For me to perform an impossible task that would take who knows how long?”

Helene's perfectly sculpted brows arched. “You've been speaking to our Rory.”

“Did you keep him prisoner for ten years, too?”

“Oh, Rory and I had terrible fun together,” Helene practically purred. “But look at him now. Alive. Happily married. A fancy lord who considers the rulers of two different realms to be his close, personal friends. You could have that, you know.”

Cassia steeled her nerve and backed toward the door. “I don't need to make a deal with you to make my dreams come true. I don't need a magical shortcut. I've spent ten years fighting for what I want. And if it takes another ten years, at least I'll know that I did it on my own.”

“Really?” Helene leaned back in her chair. “How far have you gotten on your own? And exactly what would you have achieved without that little charm on your wrist?”

Cassia clutched her bracelet automatically. “You didn't give this to me.”

“Didn't I?”

“I spun it. I picked it up when you tossed it aside. I put it around my wrist.”

“If that's the lie you want to tell yourself, well, that's fine with me.” Helene leaned forward and her voice dropped conspiratorially, “But we both know the truth, don't we?”

Cassia stumbled backward. “No.”

“You think you managed to escape? From me? You think I didn’t let you go? That you haven’t been doing exactly what I wanted this entire time?”

Cassia’s head swam as she tried to reevaluate everything she’d done in the past ten years. Was Helene’s hand in any of it? Surely not. As a child she’d barely gone anywhere beyond her home, the hamlet, and the surrounding woods. Once she’d left home, she’d widened her search for clues but wandered the realm aimlessly until she’d lucked into her encounter with the duke at the market.

The duke.

He was one of the most powerful people in Fairmont. If Helene wanted power—or to destabilize it—he was an excellent target. But what could Cassia have done to help bring that about?

Her stomach dropped.

Grayson had asked if it was safe to have a unicorn in the stables. Maybe the animal hadn’t followed Cassia by chance. Maybe the rescue had all been an act. Maybe Waffles was working for Helene.

“Did you send the unicorn to kill the duke?”

Helene burst into laughter before letting out a large sigh and wiping a tear from her eye. “Oh, you are a delight. Maybe I *should* have kept you. Why would I want to kill a duke? What do I care about mere human politics? Even if the rulers of all the realms put aside their petty differences and fought as one against me, they still wouldn’t have what they needed to defeat me.” She waved her hand, as if shooing away a swarm of gnats.

“Now, about that wish ...”

“No.” Cassia took another step backward. “I’ll never make a deal with you, and I’ll do everything in my power to make sure you don’t get whatever it is you want.”

“Well, you certainly have pep. I’m used to people being much more obliging.”

Cassia retreated further. “I’m not scared of you.”

Helene rose from her chair, her gown rippling and shifting like it was alive. “Now, we both know *that’s* not true.”

The witch swept forward, and the familiar whispering sound of the chain rang in Cassia’s ears. She turned and bolted for the door.

Cassia twisted the handle feverishly. The door rattled in the frame but refused to budge.

She cast a panicked look over shoulder. The witch strolled toward her, unhurried, knowing there was no other way out of the courtyard, nowhere else for Cassia to go.

She clawed at the handle, hammered on the wood, threw her weight against it, cried in desperation.

The door wrenched inward, the handle ripped from her aching hands. She tumbled into the tavern, and a strong pair of arms caught her before she hit the floorboards.

“Cassia? Cass? What’s wrong?” Grayson’s voice wrapped around her like a hug.

Cassia twisted around to stare outside. The courtyard was empty. Both Helene and the table from the gingerbread house were gone.

CASSIA SAT AT THE table, her hands shaking as she drained her mug of mead. When she set it down, Grayson refilled it. He watched her silently, his eyes pinched with worry.

She told him everything.

She thought about lying, or leaving out large portions, but in the end she decided that if she wanted him to be someone she could rely on, she had to be someone that *he* could rely on. And that meant telling the whole truth.

“So ...” He ran his fingers through his hair and tugged on it, as if that might help his brain process his thoughts. “If she’s not after His Grace, what does she want?”

Cassia shrugged. “I’ve met a lot of people but most only briefly before I moved on. Other than the duke, the person I spent the most time with was —” Realization hit like a wyvern landing on her shoulder and digging in its claws. “It’s Lenore. It has to be. She’s a witch. Of sorts. She must have some power that Helene’s afraid of.”

“Like what?” At least Grayson hadn’t immediately dismissed her suspicions.

What had Helene said?

Even if the rulers of all the realms fought as one against me, they still wouldn’t have what they needed to defeat me.

“It has to be the spindles. That’s why Helene stole them, because they’re a threat. Lenore’s charms affected her, maybe there’s one that could disable her.” She sighed and shook her head. “I don’t know enough about them or how their magic works to know for sure.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re wrong.”

She sipped at her mead. The sweet liquid was starting to churn in her stomach. “We need to visit Lenore. If anyone knows what the witch wants, she will. Do you think His Grace will allow it?”

“If you tell him the reason.”

“We can’t do that!” Cassia protested. Her voice turned mocking against her will. “The witch who held me captive as a child might want to wield ultimate power over the Seven Realms and I need to go ask a magical Spinster if she can help.”

Grayson gave her a flat look. “His Grace cares about the realm, remember? And that story actually sounds like something he would want to help with.”

“And if I’m wrong? If it isn’t Lenore but something else entirely? Then what? He’ll lose what little faith he has left in me. Especially after we tell him about the whole marriage debacle.”

Grayson clicked his tongue. “About that ...”

“Isn’t that why we’re here? To figure out a way to untangle my mess?”

“I’ve been thinking ...” He crossed his arms, his fingers tracing the lines of his tattoo where it peeked out from under the rolled cuff of his sleeve.

“What if we don’t?”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t tell him the wedding’s off.”

Cassia opened her mouth, but when no words came out, she closed it again.

“Remember what Rory said. If you can’t find Avalon, give her a reason to find you.” He leaned his elbows on the table. “A wedding’s a pretty good reason, don’t you think?”

“You don’t want to marry me.”

“We don’t have to go through with it. I’ll baulk at the last moment.” His gaze held hers. “Think about it. I might not have a title, but I’m still the duke’s brother, and judging by his reaction, it wouldn’t take much to convince him to make it a grand affair. We’ll do a big announcement,

spread the word, even send posters out to every town with your sister's portrait on them asking people to look for her."

"Grayson!" There were so many words fighting to flow from Cassia's tongue that they tripped each other up and none came out.

He slumped back again. "Yeah, you're right. It probably won't work. I've gotten your hopes up for nothing."

"No," she choked out. "After my parents refused to believe me about Avalon, refused to help me search, told me to give up, I never bothered asking anyone for help again. And after failing to find her for ten years, my hopes were crushed, and I only kept going because without the search, I had nothing. But now my hopes are exactly where they need to be, and that's all thanks to you." She reached over to squeeze his hand. "Thank you."

He squeezed back before topping up their mead, shaking the last drops out of the flagon, and lifting his mug. "Here's to impossible quests."

She knocked her mug against his. "And fake marriages."

THEY BORROWED THE HORSE and trap and drove to Lenore's the next evening, giving the duke the excuse that they wanted to tell her about the wedding in person. But when they arrived, her cottage was empty and her wagon was gone.

"What do we do now?" Grayson asked.

Cassia rubbed at her temples as she stood on Lenore's back step, surveying the treeline. "I know she travels to different markets, selling her wares. She could be at any one of a hundred villages or towns. She could return within the hour or not for a week."

"So, we'll try again another time," he suggested. "Or hope she sees the announcement, like Avalon."

Cassia nodded. It all felt a bit futile, sitting back and hoping that they saw the posters, hoping they decided to attend the wedding.

Grayson squeezed her shoulder. "We'll find them. We'll figure this out."

It was too late and too dark to attempt the return trip to the duke's summer home, so they spent the night in Lenore's barn.

Grayson slept sprawled on his back, snoring softly until Cassia gave him a shove and he snorted, rolled onto his side, and fell silent. She lay with her back pressed against his for warmth, a single horse blanket draped over the

both of them, trying to fathom what she could possibly be on a course to do that would please the witch.

It had been over two weeks since she'd even seen Lenore.

Unless that was it.

What if abandoning Lenore was the problem?

Lenore and Helene had been friends, and then Helene had betrayed her, stolen her spindles, and taken her unicorn. Even Lenore's mentor had trained her, passed on the responsibility for the spindles, and left.

Hadn't Cassia done the exact same thing?

She'd used Lenore, gotten what she wanted—mostly—but when Lenore had suggested Cassia become her apprentice, she'd declined. So, Lenore was alone again. And even though her charms were powerful, she was no match for Helene alone.

Maybe what Helene wanted Cassia to do wasn't a thing at all, but the absence of a thing.

She ought to find Lenore and agree to be her apprentice. Maybe together they could defeat the witch. But that would mean she'd have to give up her role with the duke. And she didn't exactly have an aptitude for spinning.

Unless *that* was what Helene wanted? Maybe becoming Lenore's apprentice was the wrong thing to do. Maybe Cassia would only spin vices and corrupt the magic of the spindles somehow.

It was impossible to know how the witch's mind worked, what plan she was weaving.

Cassia finally fell into a fitful sleep in the darkest depths of the night, and she awoke at first light with a herd of unicorns clustered around them. One—Honey, Cassia thought—was chewing on the edge of their blanket.

Grayson startled beside her.

"Don't make any sudden moves," Cassia said, easing herself into a seated position.

"Are they all unicorns too?" Grayson asked.

"Yes, but I don't know if they're all as friendly as Waffles."

Cassia pushed the blanket aside, rose to her feet, and offered her hand to Sugar, who was eying her sternly. "We came to see Lenore," she murmured. "Don't suppose you can tell us when she'll be back?"

Sugar ignored her, instead gumming at her bracelet.

Had Helene really meant for Cassia to wear it? It seemed unlikely. How had the witch known which spindle Cassia would choose? How had she known Cassia would pick up the discarded thread and loop it around her wrist rather than sweeping it up with everything else?

But if Helene was pleased that Cassia was wearing it, maybe it was time she took it off.

She hooked her finger under the thread, pulled it away from her skin, and offered herself to Sugar.

“What are you doing?” Grayson hissed. “Have you seen the teeth on those things!”

“She won’t hurt me,” Cassia said, to convince herself as much as him.

Sugar’s teeth caught the thread, she let out a happy hum, and the bracelet fell in two. Cassia caught it before Sugar could eat it and turned to Grayson, showing him the thread dangling from her fingers.

He rolled to his feet and cradled her hand in his. “You did it.”

“I did it.”

He smiled at her. “I’m proud of you.”

“I guess you don’t need to worry about me lying to you anymore.”

“You know that normal people lie all the time, right?”

“Yes, but I did it magically. It was different.”

“Yeah,” he said, wincing, “about that ...”

He refused to explain until they were seated on the trap, heading back to the duke’s summer home. He sat bent forward, resting his forearms on his knees, massaging the reins. Cassia sat beside him, twisting her broken bracelet around and around her fingers.

“If you don’t tell me soon,” she finally said, losing patience, “I’ll simply make something up. And it won’t be flattering.”

He let out a faint laugh. “Right, well ... because my mother was dux when I was born, that technically made me royalty.”

“You’re a royal?” Cassia knew precious little about how nobles lived and even less about royals.

“Not anymore. Not since my parents died and Beaumont took over.”

Cassia frowned, wondering for a moment who Beaumont was, before remembering that it was the duke’s given name. It was the first time she’d heard Grayson call him anything but his title. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I’ll grant it’s a strange rule, but it’s how the duchies have operated for generations. We don’t have an endless supply of royals like some of the other realms, their numbers growing with every generation, every person who can trace their lineage back to a ruler calling themselves a prince or princess. We only have the current duxes and their direct descendants. When each dux passes on their title, the people who are considered royals change too.”

“But what if they die before they choose?” Cassia asked. “Who gets to decide who takes the title? Or what if they don’t have children?”

Grayson’s brows dipped. “That’s what happened to Beaumont. Our mother died before bequeathing her title, but everyone knew he was her preferred choice because she’d been training him for years. But the title of dux doesn’t have to be passed to family. Anyone could’ve tried to claim it, if they could’ve proven Mama had them in mind, if they had enough support.”

“Anyone?” she asked, her voice flattened by doubt. “I think you meant to say ‘any noble.’”

Grayson cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Do you want to hear my story or not?”

“Please, do go on,” she said, only faintly teasing.

“Because I could’ve inherited the title—in theory, at least—that made me a royal, so when I was born”—he paused and blew out a long breath before saying the next words in a rush—“a fairy came and gave me a royal gift.”

“A what now?”

“A royal gift. A little bit of magic.”

“You have magic?”

“Just a little bit.”

“Given to you by a fairy?”

“Yes.” He turned to glare at her. “Can you stop interrupting?”

Cassia pinched her lips together with her fingers as she attempted to hold in a laugh.

Grayson rolled his eyes. “Some gifts are really useful, like excellent horsemanship or the ability to find something you’ve lost in the first place you look. Others aren’t so great, like flowers blooming in your footsteps—even when you’re indoors.”

“What’s yours, then?” Cassia said through her pinched lips. There was no way Grayson could understand her muffled words, but he knew what she was asking regardless.

“I’m immune to charms.”

Cassia gasped, dropped her hand from her mouth, and lifted her bracelet. “Charms like this?”

He winced. “To be fair, no one’s ever tried to put a charm like that on me, but it’s more ‘charms’ in general.”

“Like what?”

“Like when people are trying to impress me, I see right through it.”

Cassia’s stomach shriveled into a tiny ball. “You knew when I was lying the entire time we’ve known each other?”

“I can’t detect lies, but the harder you spin one of your stories, the less inclined I am to believe you.”

“Huh,” she said, casting her mind back over all their early interactions. “What about other people?”

“All people. That’s why I prefer spending time with the horses; they’re never out to impress.”

Cassia snuggled in beside him and rested her head on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, that must be hard.”

“It comes in handy.”

“Does that mean you’re also immune to the charms of a certain Lady Eliza Pendleton?”

He snorted. “Eliza never set out to charm me.”

That wasn’t the answer she’d been expecting, and it reminded her that he’d never explained what had changed in their relationship since their childhood playing together, and what it had to do with the Pendletons’ matchmaking efforts. But instead of asking, she directed the conversation away from the sensitive subject.

“But then why were you worried that I was trying to use you because you’re the duke’s brother?”

He shifted beside her. “I thought you’d found a way to fool me. I’m not used to feeling *duped*.”

“I’m sorry.” She sat up again, worried she might be making him feel that way now. “What about with Rory? Did it help then?”

“I don’t think he could charm anyone if he tried. He’s too sincere. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t have secrets or tell lies. It just means he doesn’t try to cover them with charisma.”

“Is that why you agreed we could trust him but kept hounding him with questions?”

“Just trying to figure him out.”

“What about animals? You said the horses don’t try to charm anyone, but what about the unicorns? They make us think they’re something they’re not.”

“I don’t have a lot of experience in that regard, but as far as I can tell, they’re just being themselves, and it’s our fault if we don’t see them for who they really are.”

“Maybe I should try that.”

Grayson nudged her shoulder with his. “You’ve done pretty well for yourself. But it doesn’t hurt to let people see the real you now and again.”

She studied the thread in her hand; she’d been idly knotting it as they talked. Its appearance had dulled—to gray rather than silver—and its magic had gone, but that didn’t mean she was ready to let it go. She worked the thread carefully, knotting it into the rough shape of a flower.

“Can I borrow this?” she asked, reaching over to untie Grayson’s neckerchief before he could answer.

She carefully wrapped the flower-shaped thread in the fabric, which was grimy with dust from the road, and buried the parcel in her pocket.

“My neck’s cold,” Grayson grumbled. “If I catch a chill, you’ll have to do my work for me.”

“Poor thing.” Cassia laughed as she draped her arm around his neck. “Luckily, your betrothed is here to keep you warm.”

“Keep me warm? That’s only fair since you hogged the blanket last night and left me shivering.”

“You deserved it for keeping me awake half the night with your snoring.”

“I don’t snore.”

“I’ve got a house full of stable hands who’ll back me up.”

“They’d better not if they know what’s good for them.” He smiled at their banter but then his expression turned serious. “I don’t like lying to everyone.”

She drew back again, giving him some space. “Do you think they’ll believe we’re in love?”

“Well, we have been spending a lot of time together. And everyone knows I’m reserved, so we don’t need to put on a show. But ... I don’t know. It feels wrong.”

“It *is* wrong.” She clasped his arm. “But we’re doing it for the right reason, and we’ll stop before anyone gets hurt.”

This time, he put his arm around *her* shoulders and pulled her close, pressing his temple against hers. “If it helps you find your sister, it’ll be worth a little subterfuge.”

LENORE STAYED AT THE sanctuary for one night, eating a simple dinner and letting the unicorns hunt.

Cassia didn’t return.

The next morning, she hitched the unicorns to the wagon and headed for home, hoping to spot Cassia on the road. At the end of the first day, she suspected she wouldn’t see the young woman again. Or at least, not for a while.

In the meantime, she would keep protecting the spindles, keep caring for the unicorns, and keep focused. She’d forgotten part of her vow and had let friendship distract her. She didn’t intend to do that again.

She took a different route, one that headed south then east rather than east then south, so she could stop at different villages and sell more wares. After a few days of lazy travel, she was nearing home when she realized she was about to pass Marika and Rowena’s farm.

The women had been so nice, and so keen for Lenore to visit, that it seemed rude not to stop in.

She guided the unicorns down the narrow road through the trees. The ground rose slowly under the wagon until she came out into a large clearing where dozens of llamas sprawled and frolicked in fenced paddocks. She’d barely pulled to a stop in front of the farmhouse when the door opened and Rowena stepped out.

“Welcome,” she said with a smile. “It’s good to see you.”

Lenore hesitated before climbing down from the wagon. “If you’re busy, I can come back another time.”

“No, not at all. In fact, I was about to sit down for a cup of tea. Will you join me?”

Lenore smiled timidly. “I’d love to.”

“Marika isn’t home,” Rowena said, as she led Lenore into their cozy kitchen. “She headed to the village for supplies, but she’s due back before dusk.”

Rowena brewed a pot of tea, laid some cakes and dried fruit on a platter, set it all on a tray, and carried it out to where a large porch wrapped around the back of the house.

“Oh my,” Lenore murmured as her gaze caught on the view.

As Rowena had told her when the women came to Lenore’s house, it was a beautiful spot. Because the land was cleared, and their property sat on the side of a hill, the house gave a lovely view over the treetops below. Lenore thought that if her eyesight had been sharp enough, she might have been able to see all the way to Grenham.

Rowena set the tray on a small table, eased down into one of the chairs with a groan, and poured the tea into two cups. Lenore sat beside her, took her eyes off the view long enough to pick up her cup, and let out a contented sigh.

They sat for a moment, quietly sipping their tea, before Rowena asked, “Where’s your young friend?”

“She wasn’t my friend,” Lenore said, although she knew that was a lie. “She was my apprentice. And I don’t know. We had a disagreement, and she left.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Rowena said. “She did seem a little troubled.”

She didn’t ask for details, didn’t push to know more, didn’t offer her opinion or advice. And that was fine with Lenore. She felt no need to talk about it.

“She was troubled,” Lenore burst out, surprising herself. “Something happened to her as a child, and it came up again recently, and I can’t help but feel that I was so focused on what I needed to do that I didn’t think about what it would be like for her.”

Rowena let out a murmur of sympathy.

“I thought she knew what she was taking on, that she was ready,” Lenore continued, talking more to herself than Rowena. “She certainly had the skill required, but maybe she didn’t appreciate the weight of the vow until she’d

made it. I took my vow when I was her age, but I'd had four years to build up to it. She didn't need that much time. Or, at least, I thought she didn't."

This time, Rowena's "Hrm" sounded confused, and Lenore realized she wasn't explaining anything clearly. The older woman was watching her with compassion and warmth. She was touched by magic, the same way that Lenore and Cassia were. And she knew about the unicorn thread. Maybe if Lenore explained the whole thing, Rowena could help her understand where she'd gone wrong.

So, she started at the beginning and told her everything. About when she'd met her own mentor, about Helene stealing the spindles, about realizing she and Cassia could help each other, about accepting it was time to pass the spindles on.

Rowena listened intently, nodded along, and occasionally asked for a quick clarification.

When Lenore had poured out the whole story, Rowena sat for a moment, her gaze unfocused and her expression intense, as if she was working through what Lenore had said. Eventually she rose from her seat and said, "I'm going to need more tea."

When she returned with a fresh pot, she sat down, faced Lenore, and said, "If I've got this straight, everything you know about Spinsters you learned from your mentor, Faye?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever met any others?"

"No."

"Then how do you know it's all true?"

Lenore opened her mouth before closing it again. How *did* she know it was true? Because Faye had told her, and Lenore had no reason to doubt her. Eventually she asked, "Why would she lie?"

Rowena shrugged. "I can't say without more information, but what if she fell in love and regretted her vow? What if she had a falling out with the other Spinsters? It would be very convenient for her to hand responsibility of the spindles over to you, who knew no better, and wash her hands of the whole Order."

Lenore slumped back in her chair. "You mean, all this time, there's a chance I didn't have to be alone?"

Rowena reached across the table to squeeze Lenore's hand. "You don't have to be alone, no matter what vow you made. The spindles certainly do need to be protected, but good friends will support you in what you do, not hinder you."

Tears pricked at Lenore's eyes as she squeezed Rowena's hand back. "Thank you."

Lenore wasn't sure what to do next. She would need time to think about it, but returning to her empty house didn't seem like the right step, so when Rowena invited her to stay the night, she gratefully accepted.

They were in the kitchen, putting the finishing touches on dinner, when Marika arrived home. Her eyes lit up with delight when she spotted Lenore.

"I thought I recognized that wagon out front." Marika paused to kiss her wife. "To what do we owe this honor?"

"It's a long story that might be better shared over a meal," Lenore said, "but in short, I really needed a friend or two."

Marika made a happy little inhale. "Well, you certainly have two here."

Over dinner, Lenore repeated a condensed version of the story to bring Marika up to date, and when she got to the part about Cassia making her vows, Marika winced.

"I think I might know why the young miss isn't so keen on those vows." Marika crossed the room to where she'd hung a satchel on the back of the door, and when she returned, she handed Lenore a scroll.

Lenore unrolled it, and Cassia's face stared out at her.

"She can't get married!" Lenore gasped, after reading the details. "She vowed to be a spinster."

"If, as you say, she wasn't quite clear on how alone her vow would make her," Rowena said, "maybe she decided spending her life with a young man and no spindles was better than the opposite."

Lenore read the poster again, as if the words would be different this time. The wedding was a little over a week away, and the happy couple were desperate to find Cassia's sister in time. That's why the poster included a sketch of her face, because it was Avalon's face too.

"She told me about this young man," Lenore murmured. "His brother was forcing him to wed. But she didn't mention she was in love with him. I knew she was wont to lie, but keeping this from me, when she knew the vow she had to make ..."

“Maybe that’s *why* she kept it from you,” Rowena said softly.

Lenore crushed the poster in her fist. “That’s why she didn’t want to rid herself of the bracelet. She didn’t think she could tell me the truth. And she was probably right.”

If Cassia had told her that she didn’t want to take a vow of spinsterhood because she wanted to marry, Lenore wouldn’t have taken her on as her apprentice. Not only because she considered the vow sacred and the protection of the spindles paramount, but because she wouldn’t have bound Cassia to spinsterhood unwillingly.

But Cassia *had* taken the vow. It was too late. She couldn’t get married now.

Unless ...

“I need to find the Spinsters,” Lenore said. “I don’t know how many are out there or where they are, but I need to know if Faye misrepresented the truth. Maybe Cassia doesn’t have to choose between marriage and being a Spinster. Maybe none of us do.”

Marika and Rowena exchanged a look, and something silent passed between them. Marika nodded, and Rowena said, “I know where you can start.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THEY LEFT EARLY THE next morning, Lenore driving the wagon and Rowena sitting beside her.

The city of Windweald was even further away than the sanctuary. It sat on the south coast, far to the west. It would take six days to get there, traveling at a steady pace. Six days there, six days back, plus the time they spent in the city. It was too long. Lenore would miss the wedding.

But two unicorns could travel a lot further and faster than ordinary llamas, even pulling a wagon. Especially if you asked them nicely. And Lenore asked *very* nicely.

They made it to Windweald in four days.

As they drove through the massive gates in the city's wall, Lenore was reminded why she preferred villages and small towns. The streets were crowded, the buildings clustered together, and the stench of body odor and sewage hung in the air.

Rowena directed her through a maze of streets to a friend's house. Irena lived in a part of the city where the houses had a little space between them, and Lenore was able to pull her wagon off the street and tie the unicorns on their long leads in the yard behind the house.

Irena was around the same age as Rowena. She had warm brown skin, dark hair pulled back into a tight bun, and a welcoming smile. She had fewer gray hairs but more wrinkles, which may have been because she still had teenaged children at home. Lenore didn't meet them, but Irena yelled instructions at them before she escaped out the door.

"You've made it just in time," she said, urging the women along the street. Lenore stopped to grab her box of spindles from the wagon before rushing to catch up, unwilling to leave them unprotected in a strange city. "They've called a special meeting for tonight."

Lenore shot Rowena a puzzled look, and she explained simply with, “The Spinners and Weavers Guild.”

“The dux is coming.”

“Lord Beaumont?” Lenore asked.

Irena gave her an outraged look. “Of course not. I’m speaking of Lady Jillinda, the Duchess of Windweald.”

Lenore flushed with embarrassment and stayed silent while Irena ranted to Rowena about a dispute the Guild had been having with local merchants. Apparently, the dux was coming to help them negotiate terms.

They eventually arrived at a large warehouse near the waterfront, and let themselves in the back door. The large room was filled with spinning wheels and looms of all shapes and sizes. Dozens of people were clustered together at the far end. Most of them were women, but not all.

They were clearly late, because the meeting had already started, and Irena cursed before rushing to join the crowd, dragging Rowena with her.

Lenore spotted the dux immediately. She radiated confidence and power. Her clothes—or at least what Lenore could see of her coat and blouse—were incredibly fine but not ostentatious. Her dark hair was held back from her face with two simple clips and hung in a single, glossy sheet. She spoke eloquently and at length.

Lenore, with no understanding of the dispute, quickly tuned her out. She sat on a small stool next to a giant spinning wheel, set her box on her knees, and set to cleaning her spindles. She wished she had some fiber so she could spin, but she would make do. Maintenance might not be glamorous, but it was still important.

Once she’d checked each spindle for dents, splits, and chips; polished them and set them back in their compartments, she set the box down. Then she plucked out the spindle of benevolence and rolled the whorl against her thigh. She started to hum, trying to access the magic without any fiber, as she had during that night in the wagon with Cassia.

With her eyes closed, she visualized the virtue coming out as a single thread rather than an uncontrolled cloud. She let it drift around the room, exploring the corners, sniffing at the people, caressing the looms. Then, when she felt it wanting to escape the confines of the building, to burst out into the world, she reined it in. Although nothing changed in the way she rolled the spindle, her intent reversed. The thread of magic slithered back to

her, slightly reluctant, still wanting to explore, ever curious about the people in the room, but obedient.

When the last of the magic had returned to the spindle, Lenore let out a contented sigh and opened her eyes.

She was surrounded by a dozen women.

Everyone else had left. Including Rowena and Irena. Lenore had no idea how much time had passed.

The dux was standing right in front of her, arms crossed. Now that she was this close, it was more obvious she was only a year or two older than Lenore.

“How did you do that?” Lady Jillinda demanded

“Do what?”

“Don’t be coy.”

“Spin the magic without fiber,” an older woman, standing to Lenore’s left, said.

“Oh, um ...” Lenore shrugged. “Closed my eyes and hummed?”

Muttered disbelief ran through the women.

The duchess’ eyes narrowed. “Who taught you to do that?”

“No one. Well, maybe Cassia.” Lenore glanced around the group, their faces showing a mixture of confusion, concern, and contempt. “You’re the Order of Spinsters, then?”

“We are,” the duchess replied. “And who are you?”

“Lenore.” She gestured to the box. “And these are Faye’s spindles.”

The same older woman commented, “Looks like they’re yours, now.”

“Why have we never heard of you?” the duchess asked.

Lenore winced. “That’s actually why I’m here.”

She told the story as best she could, but the Spinsters weren’t patient listeners like Rowena had been. They interrupted constantly, questioned her indignantly, and critiqued her choices ruthlessly. They didn’t fall silent until Lenore had finished the telling and they had run out of questions.

Then the older woman, who introduced herself as Kerrice, spat, “Faye,” with such venom that it quickly spread to the others and they all voiced their opinions of her. She was never happy, didn’t seem to fit in, chafed at the Order’s cooperative management style, and had left in a huff twenty years earlier.

“What she told you wasn’t completely wrong,” the duchess said, her tone warmer. “We do take a vow to protect the spindles and never marry or have children, but that doesn’t mean we isolate ourselves.”

Kerrice took over the explanation. “We vow to become spinsters to show we take our responsibility seriously, but that rule is more descriptive than prescriptive. The Order is our spouse, and the spindles are our children, but we still have friends, and lovers, and some of us take on wards when our hopeless brother whelps one on a traveling minstrel who then decides that life on the road is no life for a child.”

That sounded incredibly specific. Lenore raised her eyebrows in question. “You?”

Kerrice blushed faintly as she shrugged. “Can’t say no to family.”

“And we help each other.” The duchess clasped hands with the women on either side of her. “Yes, we take on apprentices, and many of them decide to take their vows and join the Order, but none of us move on.”

“Once a Spinster,” someone intoned behind Lenore, and everyone else joined in with, “Always a Spinster.”

“Except for Faye,” Lenore pointed out.

“Yes, well ...” Kerrice winced. “There is the odd person who rescinds their vows.”

Lenore let out a long breath and sagged on the stool. “Thank you, this knowledge is a gift. I truly thought I was alone, that I *had* to be alone. Now I know that I’m not, and I don’t have to be.”

“You’re welcome here any time,” the duchess said. She released the hand of the woman beside her, and they both reached out to take Lenore’s.

Around the circle, the women joined hands, until they were all linked.

“You’re one of us. And it looks there’s a lot we could learn from you.”

“And Cassia?”

The duchess gave her a regretful look. “The vows can be bent but not broken. If she marries, she will no longer be welcome in the Order.”

“I understand.”

Cassia might be one of the most talented Spinsters in the Order, but the rules existed for a reason, and it wasn’t up to Lenore to rewrite them.

She had to make it back before the wedding. Cassia might still decide to choose marriage over the Order, but at least she would have made an informed decision.

WHEN CASSIA AND GRAYSON returned to the stable house after their fruitless trip to Lenore's, they found the curtain between their sleeping areas torn down, their mattresses pushed together, and a lot of giggling stable hands sneaking around.

Over the next few days, as the initial glow wore off, things mostly returned to normal.

Except without her bracelet, Cassia found it much harder to lie.

Oh, she could still spin yarns for entertainment, and her outward confidence didn't leave her when the duke asked her to complete a task she wasn't entirely sure she was capable of, but when people inquired about how excited she was for the wedding, or asked her to regale them with the story of how she had proposed, she found herself demurring.

Grayson was right. What they were doing was wrong.

She probably would've abandoned the plan if not for him. When they somewhat awkwardly climbed into their joined beds each night, she would ask if he was still sure. He would give her a reassuring smile, pat her shoulder, and whisper, "We've come this far."

Then he would snore, and she would steal the blanket, and they would sleep back to back and wake up ready to face another day.

There was no word from either Avalon or Lenore. After a week, they traveled to her house again, but it was still empty. Cassia slid an invitation under the door.

With only a few days to go, things started to spiral out of control. Wedding planning replaced Cassia's usual duties. She'd attended a few weddings as a child, and they usually involved a gathering of friends and family, an exchange of vows, and a shared meal.

Apparently, nobles did a similar thing but on a much grander scale.

Both Cassia and Grayson paid a visit to Mistress Althea—the dryad tailor—who measured them each for a set of wedding clothes while eying Cassia coolly. She gave no indication of the design she had in mind, and Cassia assumed it would be so flamboyant that she would never wear the outfit again, which seemed such a waste.

The duke's cook sat them down to explain the seven course meal she'd planned. The names of each dish sounded made-up to Cassia, and she didn't

recognize many of the ingredients. When she asked if they could do a buffet table like at the garden party, the cook laughed. Then her face fell.

“You’re jesting, aren’t you?” she asked, before turning to Grayson to gauge his opinion.

He reached over to take Cassia’s hand. “Whatever makes her happy.”

A muscle twitched in the cook’s cheek, but she forced a smile and said, “A garden party it is.”

A discussion concerning decorations was next, during which Cassia was informed that spring was a much better time for a wedding, as flowers were more plentiful, and she would have to make do with what was available and use ribbons and lace for the rest.

“Can’t it just be simple?” she practically wailed.

The decorator looked appalled. “You’re getting married at the duke’s estate. Do you want to shame him?”

This time it was Cassia who turned to Grayson for support and understanding. He gave an awkward shrug. “There are standards that must be maintained ...”

Cassia sighed and turned back to the woman. “Use your best judgment.”

From then on, she used that phrase as a sword. Any decisions that needed to be made, she parried them with a well aimed “Use your best judgment.” She wore her knowledge that the wedding was fake like armor. She retreated to the stables and hid behind Felicity and Waffles as if they were a shield.

One day, she was leaning against the outer wall of the stables, watching Felicity ride Waffles in circles around the yard, the unicorn deftly jumping a series of low obstacles, the young girl laughing with glee, when voices inside the building caught her attention. One belonged to Grayson. The other was unfamiliar, but it belonged to a woman, and she sounded posh.

Cassia crept forward to peer through the open doorway.

Grayson was tending to a stunning black horse, and the rider who stood beside him was Lady Eliza Pendleton. She was dressed in a form-fitting black riding jacket with silver buttons and a long tail; cream breeches; knee high boots; a tall, black riding hat decorated with feathers and a short veil shielding her face. She held a short riding crop in a death grip.

As he bent over the horse’s hoof, Lady Eliza glanced around, as if checking they were alone in the barn. Cassia shrank back, but the

noblewoman didn't notice her.

"You could've told me yourself," Lady Eliza said in a fierce whisper, "instead of sending your brother."

"I didn't send him," Grayson said without looking up, his voice resigned. "He wanted to talk to your parents himself, to smooth any hurt feelings."

"What about my feelings? *You* should've told me." Eliza's voice cracked. "I think I deserved that much."

Grayson released the horse's leg and straightened to face her. "You deserved all that and more. But I couldn't give it to you. I still can't."

"You made me a promise ..." The lady's voice turned wispy on the last word, and Cassia wasn't sure that she'd heard it correctly.

"I did. And I'm sorry that I couldn't keep it."

"But you're quite happy to marry *her* and leave me at the whims of my parents' ambitions? You must really be in love."

Cassia flinched at the pain in Lady's Eliza's voice, remembering the unhappy look the woman had given her the night she'd danced with Grayson at the garden party. She couldn't help wondering who Lady Eliza's parents would want her to marry if Grayson wasn't available.

Grayson's hand twitched, as if he wanted to reach for Lady Eliza. "I'm not in love with *her*."

Cassia wanted to shrink into the earth. She shouldn't be listening, because if she understood the mysterious way in which nobles spoke, then Grayson had just confessed to being in love with Lady Eliza. But that didn't explain why he didn't want to marry her.

"Then why—" Lady Eliza's voice hitched. "Oh. I see. Thank you so much for clarifying the situation. I do hope you enjoy your nuptials."

"Lizzie, I can't—"

Lizzie?

"How is my horse's hoof, Master Grayson?"

Grayson sighed. "Her hoof is fine. Which you already knew."

The horse snuffled and shuffled as Lady Eliza hoisted herself into the saddle.

"Thank you for your assistance. I'm afraid I'll have to decline His Grace's invitation to your wedding. I believe I feel myself coming down with something."

She let out a delicate—and fake—cough then spurred the horse into motion and cantered out of the barn before Grayson could say another word.

If he was in love with Lady Eliza, why was he so dead set against marrying her? And what promise had he broken?

Cassia may have laid herself bare in front of him, but it was clear that he was still keeping secrets.

LENORE AND ROWENA LEFT early on the morning after the meeting with the Spinsters. She told Rowena as much as she could without giving away more of the Order's secrets.

"It's good you've found your people," Rowena said.

"It's all thanks to you. Without your help, I wouldn't have found them in time to get to the wedding."

And she still might not make it. She would have to push the unicorns harder than she ever had—not that she thought they would mind. But it meant no stopping to eat or sell charms. They started early each morning, bought supplies to last through the day, paused only to relieve themselves, and retired late each night. The unicorns, instead of wilting under the constant demand, seemed to respond to the challenge. Their fleece shimmered silver, their horns protruded from their fringes, and their feet pounded the packed dirt roads until they were practically flying.

"They don't have wings, do they?" Rowena asked at one point, her boots braced against the foot board, her hands clamped onto the seat.

"Not that I've ever seen," Lenore replied.

"That's not very reassuring," Rowena groaned. But she never complained, she never asked Lenore to slow down or take a break, and when Lenore tired from concentrating on the road ahead, Rowena insisted on taking the reins.

On the second night, they drew the wagon to a stop beside a stream. Lenore was fairly certain that a small village was around the next bend in the road, but she'd been fairly certain about that for the past hour, and no village had appeared. She unharnessed the unicorns, working almost by touch in the shadows cast by the lanterns hanging at the front of the wagon. It was lucky the unicorns had better night vision than she did or they

might've broken their shanks by running headlong into a ditch. Or gotten them lost by missing a turn. Or drowned them all by plunging into a river.

There was no chance of that in this stream, as it was shallow, which Lenore found out when she took one of the lanterns from the wagon and went to refill their water canteens.

As she crouched by the water, her head drooping, her eyes half closed, her body on its last reserve, a flicker of light drew her attention to the other side of the stream.

Her exhaustion fled.

"Hello?" she called. Surely no one was over there. The other side of the stream was forest, thick with undergrowth. There was no bridge. The stream wasn't so wide that it couldn't be crossed, but who would bother when the road was on this side?

The flicker came again. The light from the lantern was reflecting off something in the darkness. Something silvery. A twig snapped and leaves rustled as something moved. A soft hum echoed across the water.

It had to be a unicorn.

Lenore wondered if it was purely by chance they'd stopped in the same place a unicorn was coming to drink, or if the animal had been keeping pace with them on their journey.

She finished filling the canteens, stoppered them, and slung the cord joining them around her neck. She stood slowly, holding the lantern aloft and making soft, soothing sounds.

The unicorn nosed out of the brush, catching just enough of the light that Lenore knew she was right.

"What are you doing out here alone?" she murmured. "Why don't you come over and meet Custard and Trifle?"

The unicorn's ears twitched and her head moved side to side as if she were watching for threats.

Lenore took a careful step into the stream, the water flowing around the toe of her boot. "Come on ..."

The unicorn edged backward. Lenore took another step. The water seeped into the leather. The unicorn faded between the trees.

Lenore crossed the remainder of the stream as quickly as she could and pushed her way into the forest. The brush sprang back into place behind her, like a door snapping shut, but ahead it wasn't so thick. The unicorn was

only a few feet in front of her, but for each tentative step Lenore took toward her, the unicorn backed further away.

At least she was easy to follow, as she trampled the undergrowth and made a path.

Lenore eventually closed the gap between them. Five feet. Then four. Then three. By the time she was close enough to reach out her hand for the unicorn to sniff, the animal had stopped her skittish behavior. She licked Lenore's fingers and stood quite placidly as Lenore stroked her neck. She fashioned a simple leash from the cord from the canteens and looped it around the unicorn's neck.

"Now, let's get back to the others," she said. "I think you'll like having some company."

She wouldn't make the unicorn stay if she didn't want to, but she'd found over the years that they were happier in a herd.

When she turned around to retrace her steps, the lantern light caught something on the ground that she hadn't noticed when she'd been so focused on the unicorn. Half a dozen mushrooms clustered together, the ruffled edges of their caps overlapping each other. To the left were a few more. And more beside those.

Lenore turned in a slow circle. They were all around her.

She'd walked into a fairy ring.

She sucked in a wavering breath and ran back the way she'd come, but she smacked into an invisible wall and stumbled backward, letting out a curse.

She tried again, slower this time, but the result was the same.

She stood on her tiptoes and stretched high.

She bent over and reached low.

She turned around, closed her eyes, and walked backward.

Nothing worked. Nothing let her past the mushroom line.

She was trapped.

"WHAT A SURPRISE TO see you again so soon," a smug voice said from the darkness.

Lenore held the lantern high, and Helene sauntered into the pool of light, stopping at the edge of the ring. She was wearing another long gown, the

hem of which was perfectly clean despite sweeping along the forest floor.

“What do you want?” Lenore bit out.

Helene strolled around the perimeter of the circle, while Lenore turned to keep her in view. “Oh, nothing. I merely heard that my dear friend Lenore was in a spot of bother, so I decided to stop by and see if I could lend a hand.”

Lenore let out a loud, “Ha! You were never my friend. And don’t think I don’t realize that you led me here.”

For a moment, Helene looked genuinely hurt, and Lenore experienced a moment of doubt. But then Helene’s lips pulled into a smirk. “We had some good times, didn’t we? Why do you insist on dwelling on the fact that I tricked you into making a wish and stole your silly little spindles?”

“And Waffles,” Lenore snapped. She tried to calm herself down, to tell herself that she didn’t care what Helene said because it was all lies and distorted truths. Yet she couldn’t keep the emotion from her voice or the feeling of betrayal from her heart.

Helene waved her hand dismissively. “Your unicorn is fine. Loved, even. You’ve got your spindles back. And you even found a little apprentice to keep you company.”

“Cassia’s gone,” Lenore ground out. “And don’t pretend you don’t know that.”

“Has she?” Helene paused and stroked her chin as if she were truly unsure. “Or is she *exactly* where she’s meant to be?” She shook her head. “I suppose it doesn’t matter, since you’ll never get out of that circle. You know, you really are quite invisible to anyone on the outside.”

“If you came here merely to taunt me, may I politely suggest you bog off.”

“You should be grateful,” Helene growled, losing her guise of cool cruelty. “I taught you a valuable lesson.”

Lenore noted the way the pointed toes of Helene’s boots peeked out from under her gown, right at the edge of the mushrooms. If Lenore played this right, she might be able to taunt the witch into breaking the circle, and use her to escape. Though even she knew that was a big “might.”

“What lesson was that?” she asked.

“I taught you that friendship was fickle. I taught you what true loyalty meant. I showed you what you truly held dear.”

Lenore wound her anger and resentment into a tight ball and shoved it deep down inside her, to be dealt with later. “Was *that* what you taught me?” She forced her voice to be as cool as Helene’s had been. “I thought it was how to apply too much kohl around one’s eyes.”

Helene’s expression darkened. “Your petty insults can’t hurt me.” She stepped over the mushrooms and jabbed her finger at Lenore. “I’ve traded barbs with people who were much more proficient at it than you.”

Lenore reached into her pocket for the only weapon she had, a weapon she’d kept with her, moved from one outfit to the next, ever since Cassia had given it to her. The thread of self-doubt that Cassia had pretended was her bracelet. She lunged forward, caught Helene’s arm, and whipped the thread down so that it looped around both their wrists.

It was the perfect length—or maybe it *grew* to be the perfect length—and the two ends knitted together.

Helene cursed in surprise and threw herself backward, exactly as Lenore had hoped she would. But instead of pulling Lenore *through* the barrier, Helene simply pulled Lenore *into* it.

Lenore hit the barrier hard, just as she had every other time, bounced off, and fell to the ground. And because she was bound to Helene, she pulled the witch down with her.

Helene landed on her hands and knees with an, “Oof!”

Their hands were twisted awkwardly, and the thread bit into Lenore’s skin. She pushed herself to a sitting position to relieve the pressure.

Helene gave her a filthy look. “Well, *thank you* very much.”

Lenore laughed. Loudly. “Don’t tell me a circle of mushrooms is enough to defeat the all-powerful fairy godmother.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Helene snapped, though doubt flickered across her face, probably due to the thread’s influence. “I’m only trapped because I’m bound to *you*.”

“So a simple thread is your one weakness. I’ll remember that.”

Helene stood in a huff and yanked Lenore up with her. “The only thing that can break unicorn thread is a unicorn. But luckily, we have one right here.” She thrust their bound hands in the animal’s direction.

The unicorn blinked slowly, ran her tongue over the thread, then let out an unhappy rumble and lobbed a wad of spit in their direction.

Helene let out a disgusted cry as she dodged the projectile. “Stubborn beast.”

The unicorn, heedless of Helene’s displeasure, kept her lips firmly closed and lowered herself to the ground.

Helene glared at Lenore as if the unicorn’s refusal to comply was *her* fault.

“Guess you’re stuck in here with us.”

If Helene’s expression had gotten any more sour, she would have turned into a lemon on the spot. “The unicorn isn’t stuck. *She* can leave whenever she wants.” She stomped past Lenore, gathered her skirts, and flumped down on the ground, using the unicorn like a back rest.

Rather than spending the next however long hunched over, Lenore sat on the unicorn’s back, beside the witch. She stroked the unicorn’s neck with her free hand. “I, for one,” she murmured, “appreciate you keeping us company ...” As always, the unicorn’s name sprang into her mind as if she’d always known it. It was a word she’d never heard before, but she assumed it was the name of a sweet treat, like all the others. “Pavlova.”

Helene lifted her gaze to the sky, huffed out a breath, and recited, “I wish the goblin king would come and take me away.”

Lenore waited while Helene glanced around. Nothing happened. No goblins appeared. No kings either.

Helene huffed again and repeated the words. When still nothing happened, she set her elbow on her knee, propped her chin on her hand, and muttered, “Damn it, Bernard.”

Bernard.

That was a name Lenore hadn’t heard for a long time.

Helene had spoken of him often, her on-again, off-again paramour.

Lenore opened her mouth to ask a question, but Helene wasn’t the friend she’d once known—and it had been an act all along—so why should she care about Helene’s relationship troubles?

But they might be stuck here for a while, and a little gossip would pass the time.

“Don’t tell me you two are still dancing around each other.”

Helene sighed. “Eternally.”

“He’s magic like you, then?”

“Yes.”

Lenore may never have been married, but she recognized the long-suffering tone in Helene's voice. It reminded her of her mother. She'd loved Lenore's father, and had no plans to ever leave him, but that didn't mean she didn't get frustrated at his foibles.

"Will he come to your aid?"

"Probably. Eventually. But it will amuse him to keep me waiting." Her eyes slid Lenore's way. "I'm starting to think you had the right idea, swearing off marriage."

Lenore drew back. The face staring at her wasn't that of the cold, ageless enchantress. Her skin was no longer perfectly smooth, her cheeks were ruddy, her eyebrows overgrown. Her hair, which a moment before had been a glossy black, was now dull and frizzy. Her shimmering gown was gone, replaced by a peasant blouse and knee-length pinafore dress. Her feet were bare and smudged with dirt.

Pain flared in Lenore's chest. The friend she'd lost a decade ago had returned.

This was a cruel, cruel trick.

She knew it wasn't real, that her friend had been the witch in disguise the whole time, and that this guise was a sword wielded by a trained fighter who had just slid the blade between Lenore's ribs.

She shifted forward, sliding off the unicorn, to crouch on the ground. If she hadn't been bound to Helene, she would've walked away.

"Why?" she asked, her voice catching. She knew it was pointless. Helene would never tell her the truth. And even if she did, knowing wouldn't change anything. But she had to ask. "Why did you do it? You have so much power; if you wanted my spindles, I couldn't have stopped you from taking them. Why play with my emotions?"

Helene held her gaze. Her gaze was challenging but not cruel. "A Spinster's magic is more powerful than you know. In taking your vow, you placed a spell of protection over the spindles. I couldn't merely take them." Her gaze drifted, and she wiggled her toes, as if it had been a long time since she'd been at one with nature. "You took it all so seriously. I don't often have to resort to *that* level of trickery." Her voice softened. "But none of that means our friendship wasn't real."

"Don't," Lenore snapped. "Don't pretend that this isn't an act."

“Of course it’s an act. It’s *all* an act. The simple peasant. The beautiful enchantress. The wicked witch. The benevolent fairy godmother.” She attempted to cross her arms in a huff but only succeeded in pulling Lenore off balance. “But don’t pretend I’m the only one. The independent spinster who doesn’t need friends. The dux’s servant on a mission to woo a woman. The know-nothing apprentice learning her craft.”

“Leave Cassia out of this.”

“But how can I do that when she’s right in the middle of it?”

Lenore shook her head, hoping that would help align all the disparate pieces of the story. “Is that why you stole my spindles? Because of Cassia?”

“Why do I do anything?” Helene said, knotting her free hand in her hair. “Because it amuses me. Yes, I stole the spindles because of the twins, and now I’ve set you all on a collision course, hoping I’ve poked and prodded you all enough to get you in the right places at the right times. Honestly,” she muttered, her tone exasperated. “It’s like herding unicorns.”

“You *planned* all this? You deprived me of my spindles then returned them just in time for me to pass them on? You showed me what it was like to have an apprentice, only to snatch her away again? Why?”

Helene’s gaze dropped to the thread binding their wrists before lifting again. “Have you ever been to a village fair and seen someone spinning a plate on top of a long stick? Have you watched them set another spinning? And another? Held your breath while they scampered back and forth, reaching for the plates that had slowed and spinning them again before they fell?”

Lenore nodded, unable to speak. She wasn’t sure what scared her more: the enchantress who displayed her cruelty proudly, or this ordinary looking woman who contained more potential for both good and evil than Lenore could contemplate.

“Have you ever asked *them* why they do it?” Helene rose gracefully, and as she smoothed the wrinkles from her pinafore, it transformed back into her long gown. She stood before Lenore, once again elegant, beautiful, and cold. “Although this has been a rather interesting interlude, I really *must* be going.” She gestured to the unicorn. “If you don’t mind.”

Lenore considered her options. Keeping Helene here would prevent her causing chaos in the rest of the Seven Realms—and that was surely her intention—but she doubted it would be long before Helene started to fight

for her freedom. And alone, Lenore was no match for her. Maybe it was better to do her a kindness and hope that she remembered it.

Lenore moved to crouch in front of the unicorn. "Pavlova, if you wouldn't mind, I'd dearly like to get this thread off."

Helene stepped around her so they could offer their bound wrists to the unicorn once again. This time, Pavlova gummed at their skin, caught the thread in her teeth, and bit through it. Then she slurped it up like it was a delicious treat.

"I'm sure we'll bump into each other again," the witch said, stepping outside the circle, "but if you ever need me, just make a wish."

"Wait." Lenore didn't know what she wanted to say, only that it felt wrong to part like this.

"I can't magic you out," Helene said. She sounded sincere. "Even my power is no match for that of a fairy ring. You walked in of your own volition. You have to get yourself out."

"How?"

"Well I'm sure I don't know." She started to stroll away, but paused. When she turned back, her bare toes peeked out from under her gown. "But if you want to make it in time for the wedding, you really ought to hurry." She gave Lenore a smile that was achingly familiar. There was no cruelty in it. She looked as if she'd challenged Lenore to a foot race across the meadow, and though she wasn't entirely sure who would win, she knew that they would both have fun in the process.

She glided away through the trees, the undergrowth seeming to move out of her way before returning to cover her path, as if she'd never been there.

"Well," another, different, voice said from behind Lenore. "That was rather enlightening."

LENORE SPUN AROUND FOR the second time and spotted a man standing outside the circle of mushrooms. He was wearing tight leather trousers and a flouncy white shirt open halfway down his chest. His skin was faintly golden in the lantern light, and his soft blond hair gleamed.

"Who are you?" Lenore demanded. She wasn't sure she could handle another fraught encounter.

He spread his arms wide and performed a mocking bow. “I am the goblin king, here as summoned.” His voice was deep and resonant; his words seemed to dance around his mouth before rolling off his tongue with a flourish.

“Bernard,” Lenore breathed. She refused to be impressed. “I didn’t summon you.”

“Well, of course not, that was Helene.” He sat down on a large boulder that Lenore was almost entirely certain had *not* been there a moment earlier. “And yet here I am, ready and willing.”

Lenore wasn’t about to be tricked again. “What do you want?”

“What *I* want doesn’t matter.”

Lenore heard the implication in his words. “If you’re offering to make a deal, I’m not interested.”

“Bargains are Helene’s specialty. All I do is get people out of sticky situations and occasionally collect debts.”

“So, you can get me out of here?” Lenore was absolutely certain that she didn’t want to owe a debt to the goblin king any more than she wanted to make a deal with the fairy godmother, but if he *could* help her, at least she would know her options.

“Unfortunately, a fairy ring is beyond my power.”

“Then what good are you? How do I get out?”

His brows dipped and his mouth tightened, and too late Lenore realized that she shouldn’t offend someone as magical as Helene.

“You have to do that on your own,” he said tightly. Then the irritation faded from his expression. “You had the right idea, though, with Helene. Your mistake was thinking she *wanted* you out. It is *such* a pity that you are here all alone.”

Lenore swallowed her own annoyance. Why couldn’t he give her a straight answer? Because in fact she wasn’t alone. Not entirely. Pavlova was here. And Rowena was back at the wagon with Custard and Trifle.

“Is the unicorn the answer?”

Bernard didn’t reply. Instead, he stood up and smoothed out his trousers in a way that would have made the village girls from Lenore’s past giggle and blush. Then he gave her a charming smile and retreated into the darkness with a murmured, “Good luck.”

Lenore sank to the ground, her back pressed against Pavlova's side, and let out a long sigh.

She had no desire to repeat either of those encounters any time soon, but the goblin king was right, they *had* been illuminating.

She chafed at the idea that her life was merely a game to someone else, that Helene had been moving tokens like the Seven Realms was a game board. She didn't understand why Helene would steal her spindles only to return them ten years later when Lenore met Cassia, then force Cassia to decide between two mutually exclusive vows. The whole thing seemed so *cruel*. But then, she supposed that was the point.

Players didn't spare a thought for the feelings of their tokens.

That cruelty was something else Lenore didn't understand. Helene seemed to wear it proudly, like it was part of her disguise as the beautiful enchantress, but as the simple peasant girl Lenore had known all those years ago, she had been kind and fun and caring.

Even after all that she'd seen, Lenore still found it hard to accept that their friendship had been entirely fake. Helene hadn't been cruel or manipulative or mean, except once.

She pictured the entertainer at a village fair, spinning plates and thrilling their audience with the risk that the plates would drop and smash.

But if there was no audience, why not stop?

Lenore shook her head. She doubted she would ever figure out the whole truth or truly understand Helene's motivation, and she had more urgent things to worry about.

Like getting out of this fairy circle.

Lenore shrugged out of her traveling cloak, laid it over Pavlova's back, and fixed the clasp around her neck so it wouldn't slide off. Then she knelt in front of the unicorn.

"I'm going to be honest, Pavlova," she said. "I'm in a bind. If you would consider returning to the roadside and leading my friend back here, I would be incredibly grateful."

The unicorn blinked slowly and made a low humming sound. Lenore didn't hold out much hope. Some unicorns were eager to please. Others were stubborn. Pavlova was the most apathetic creature she'd ever met. She might do what Lenore requested, if she could find the motivation.

“I’ll give you another tasty treat to eat,” she coaxed. It would be a shame to sacrifice more unicorn thread, but if it meant she wasn’t trapped here forever, she would do it. She could always make more before she gave her spindles away.

Pavlova made a happy hum, clambered to her feet, and trotted out of the circle and into the darkness.

CHAPTER TWELVE

IT FELT LIKE HALF the night passed while Lenore paced around inside the fairy ring, hoping the oil in her lantern wouldn't run out before Rowena found her. Eventually, the fatigue from her days of hard travel returned, and she cleared a spot on the ground and settled down to wait.

The sounds of snapping twigs and rustling leaves startled Lenore awake, though she couldn't remember dozing off. Pavlova appeared through the trees, Lenore's cloak still around her neck, Rowena's hand clamped onto it as she stumbled through the darkness.

Lenore let out a relieved sob and called Rowena's name, but her friend made no sign that she'd heard.

Helene had said she was invisible in the circle. She was clearly silent, too.

Pavlova drew to a halt.

"Are we here?" Rowena asked. "Is that why you're stopping? Lenore?"

"I'm here!" Lenore called pointlessly. She pressed herself against the magical barrier. Pavlova was so close that if Lenore had been able to extend her arm, she could have touched the unicorn's nose.

"What am I meant to do now?" Rowena asked.

Lenore scrabbled around in the detritus on the forest floor, found a few acorn shells, and proceeded to toss them over the mushrooms at Rowena. They bounced off her chest, and she let out a startled cry.

"Pavlova, lead me back to the wagon!"

No! She couldn't go.

As Pavlova performed a slow turn, Lenore searched desperately for some other way to attract Rowena's attention *without* scaring her away.

Rowena muttered a curse under her breath and muttered, "I should've brought the lantern."

The lantern! Even though Lenore could see its light spilling over her friend, the fairy ring's magic prevented Rowena from seeing it. But a lantern wasn't a person.

Lenore found the smoothest part of the ground between two clusters of mushrooms, set the lantern down, and edged it across the boundary with her fingertips.

Rowena gasped and spun back around, her gaze dropping to where the lantern now stood. "Lenore?"

Lenore threw another acorn—not at Rowena this time, but at the ground by her feet.

Rowena pushed past Pavlova to crouch beside the lantern. She traced her fingers along the line of mushrooms.

"That's a fairy ring," she muttered before looking up, vaguely in Lenore's direction. "You're stuck in a fairy ring?"

Lenore dropped to her knees in front of her friend. "Please ..." she murmured. "Please ..."

"Pavlova, come," Rowena barked, pushing to her feet. When the unicorn sauntered over, Rowena took a good grip on Lenore's cloak, set her shoulders, and said, "I have no intention of spending the rest of my life trapped in a fairy ring, so this had better work." She let out a long breath, gritted her teeth, and slowly extended her hand over the line of mushrooms.

As soon as she could, Lenore grasped Rowena's hand and kissed her knuckles.

Rowena let out another surprised squawk, but didn't yank her hand free. "Lenore, that had better be you." She took a breath, and her voice came out with a forced, formal tone. "You're my friend, and I don't want you stuck in a fairy ring for the rest of your life, either. So why don't you come out with me?"

Rowena started to withdraw her hand, pulling Lenore with her. But as soon as Lenore's fingers met the barrier, she felt resistance. It wasn't the usual solid wall, more like she was pushing her hand into thick mud. Rowena grunted and pulled harder. Pavlova backed up until the cloak pulled taut, adding her strength to the effort.

Lenore set her feet and forced her hand through the invisible sludge, then her arm, then her head and shoulders.

"Heave, Pavlova, heave!" Rowena cried.

All of a sudden, the barrier released her, and Lenore tumbled the rest of the way like a drunkard thrown out of a tavern at closing time. The women crashed to the ground while the unicorn watched placidly.

Lenore rolled onto her back before closing her fingers around Rowena's again and giving her a grateful squeeze. "Thank you."

"I would say, 'any time,' but please don't make me do that again."

Lenore let out a tired laugh before helping Rowena up and heading back to the wagon.

THE DAY OF THE wedding dawned bright and clear. Cassia still hadn't heard from Avalon or Lenore, and she was well and truly convinced the whole charade had been a waste of time. She rolled over to face Grayson, but his mattress was empty. She found him in the stables, at his usual tasks. She watched him organizing the bridles for a moment before saying, "Don't you even get the morning of your own wedding off?"

He jumped, as if he'd been so absorbed in his task that he hadn't heard her approach. "It's good to keep busy."

She moved to stand beside him and touched his arm tentatively. "Should we discuss how we're going to back out?"

He glanced around, checking they were alone, but she'd already done that. "I guess we wait as long as possible."

"You mean let the ceremony start?"

He nodded. "If I wanted to back out, when I was about to speak my vow would be the moment I'd have the guts."

Goosebumps broke out on Cassia's arms. "But you *do* actually want to back out, remember? We both do."

A hint of pink tinged his tan cheeks. "I know. I meant if the wedding was real ..." He cleared his throat, snatched a bridle from the collection hanging on the wall, and started to retreat across the stables. "I've got a lot of work to get done if I'm going to take this afternoon off, so can we talk about this later?"

"I suppose ..." Cassia let him go, though what she really wanted to do was chase after him and give him a good shaking.

If he wasn't willing to discuss a plan, she would have to enact one of her own.

She wandered up to the duke's study to inquire as to what tasks he had to keep *her* busy until the wedding. He was seated at his desk, enjoying a strong cup of tea.

He smiled and gestured for her to take the seat across from him. "How's the bride feeling this morning?"

As she eased down onto the chair, Cassia reached into her pocket, where her bracelet was still wrapped in Grayson's neckerchief. It might have lost its power, but its presence still reassured her. "To be honest," she lied, "I'm a little uncertain."

The duke's brow creased. "You have doubts about the wedding?"

She considered the fact that he hadn't burst into a rage to be a good sign. "I do."

"That's understandable." He stood up and crossed the room to stand before his wife's portrait. "A solemn vow is one that should not be made lightly. When we negotiated my marriage to Maleena, I knew it was a good match, but the idea of committing to spend our lives together still terrified me."

"I thought you were a love match," Cassia said, her shock causing her to forget etiquette.

The duke turned and gave her an amused smile. "I was to be dux. A love match was not in my future."

"But ..." Cassia gestured to the massive portrait then swept her arms to encompass the entire estate. "You loved her so much that you refused to remarry after she died. You built a gardenful of statues of her. And you work every day under her watchful gaze."

The duke's expression drooped briefly, weighed down by grief, before a soft smile returned. "Oh, I loved her very much. She was a great woman, an excellent partner, and a wonderful mother. Over our two decades together, we went from complete strangers to dearest friends, and when she died defending our lands from the scourge of the sea, I couldn't face putting myself through that again."

"Not even for companionship?"

"It wouldn't be fair to lock someone into marriage when I have no intention of opening my heart to them. It would be a cold existence, I think."

Cassia burst out of her seat. “But wasn’t that what you were planning to do to Grayson? Lock him into a marriage with Lady Eliza Pendleton? Use him to shore up relations with her family with little regard for his heart?”

The duke’s eyebrows bounced. “Sometimes I forget you haven’t been in my service very long.”

Cassia heard the rebuke in his words and dropped back into her seat, attempting to rein in her outrage.

The duke returned to his own chair. “I’m very fond of my brother, but sometimes ...” He raised his gaze to the heavens.

Cassia stayed silent, wondering if the rebuke hadn’t been aimed at her.

“Despite the difference in our ages, Grayson and I have always been close. When he was sixteen, he asked if I would have a word to our parents about arranging a betrothal between him and Lady Eliza.”

Cassia’s jaw dropped and she managed a breathy, “What?”

“I wasn’t surprised. Our families were close and it had been clear for months that the two of them only had eyes for each other.”

Grayson? The man who never fell for anyone’s charms had fallen for Lady Eliza?

What had he said? *She never tried to charm me.*

“Did your parents refuse?” Cassia asked.

“The leviathan attacked before I had the chance to ask.”

And their parents had died. Along with the duchess.

“To my chagrin, I forget his request, consumed as I was by grief. Months passed before I remembered, and when I offered to broker the betrothal, he told me he’d changed his mind.”

There was a time when I thought there was no one else I’d rather marry. But then everything changed.

“Why?” Cassia asked, although she didn’t expect him to know the workings of his brother’s mind.

His gaze drifted back to the portrait of his wife. “He went from being the son of a duchess, a lord, to ...”

“A groom?” Cassia supplied, before the duke could find a more insulting term.

“He was so young, and I believe he felt that he suddenly had nothing to offer Lady Eliza. Although I distributed our parents’ titles between my siblings as best as I saw fit, there weren’t enough. And I thought, if I kept

him close, I could help him establish himself, make him feel worthy again.” He gave her a dry smile. “It was his choice to become a groom. He always did prefer horses over people.”

“He hates it when you wheel him out at parties. I don’t think he could endure it full time.”

The duke crossed the room and collapsed down into his chair. “I never meant to make him unhappy. I merely hoped that crossing paths with Lady Eliza would light a spark in him again.” His gaze zeroed in on Cassia, his eyes sad. “And then you came along. So I guess I was wrong.”

“You weren’t wrong,” Cassia said, as everything became clear. “But you weren’t right either.” She moved across the room to gaze at the towering portrait. His wife’s presence filled the room. “I was a fool not to see it, but Grayson’s so stoic, and I was missing a piece of the puzzle. But think about it, Your Grace. Not only did he lose his parents when the leviathan attacked, he also saw how hard your wife’s death hit you.”

“He’s grieving?” The duke looked appalled, as if he too felt like a fool for not realizing.

“He’s afraid of being hurt. So he hides with the horses—work he loves, by the way—and he refrained from marrying Lady Eliza in the hope that he would never suffer how you suffered.”

The duke’s thick brows dipped. “But he’s willing to marry you?”

“He’s not in lo—” Cassia’s voice faltered. She’d almost gone too far, almost blown the charade, almost been *too* honest.

But wasn’t that what she needed to do? She’d certainly planted a seed of doubt that could sprout in time for them to call off the wedding.

“I have to go, Your Grace.” She fled from the room without being dismissed, and ran down the hallway, hoping Grayson was still in the stables where she’d left him.

But before she could escape the house, she was ambushed by a gaggle of frantic maids, and the wedding preparations began.

LENORE AND ROWENA WOKE up on the day of the wedding still a good distance from Grenham. Lenore could only hope it wasn’t *too* far. They packed up without the need for words, having fallen into a routine over the

last few mornings. Custard and Trifle pulled the wagon, Pavlova followed behind on a long rope, and the women sat up front urging the unicorns on.

Rowena drooped in her seat, but ever since her brief nap in the fairy circle, Lenore had felt energized. Her mind was clear and her goal glistened tantalizingly in front of her.

When they finally reached the town of Grenham, Lenore let herself feel some hope. Unless there was an upturned wagon on the road ...

Or a sink hole ...

Or bandits ...

Or ...

Lenore shook her head, trying to chase away all the terrible scenarios crowding her mind. As long as nothing out of the ordinary happened, they would make it.

Instead of practicing the speech she would make to Cassia for the hundredth time, she instead asked Rowena, “How did you know Pavlova’s name?”

“I didn’t know, but I had to call her something, and it felt right.”

“It felt right because it’s her name, or at least what she wants to be called. I knew it when I looked at her, too. Just like I knew the names of all my unicorns.” Lenore studied the older woman. “You know, you could’ve been a Spinster.”

Rowena shook her head. “I don’t know about that.”

“I do. You see the unicorns for what they are, you know their names, you’re clearly a talented spinner, and I bet you could control the magic.”

Rowena gave her a sideways look. “Oh, I know I can.”

“You know? How?”

“It was a long time ago.” She waved her hand as if chasing away annoying memories. “Shortly after I joined the Spinners and Weavers Guild, Kerrice tried to recruit me. She was subtle about it, of course. No one ever comes out and asks, ‘Do you want to join my secret order?’ She tested me with unicorn fiber and one of her spindles, and when she realized I had the gift, she offered to train me. But only if I committed.”

“You declined?”

“I’d already met Rika by then. I was young and incredibly in love, and the idea of wilting away my days with a group of old fuddy-duddies didn’t appeal.”

Lenore couldn't hold in a laugh.

"I know." Rowena smiled. "Now *I'm* an old fuddy-duddy."

Lenore jostled her with her elbow. "You're not that old."

"But I am a fuddy-duddy?"

"Stop saying *fuddy-duddy*."

Rowena joined in Lenore's laughter, and Lenore wondered why she'd ever wanted to avoid being friends with her.

"So, if you knew about the Spinsters the whole time, why didn't you just tell me?"

"Weren't you listening? No one ever just comes out and talks about their secret order. You were the first Spinster I'd ever met who wasn't in Windweald. For all I knew, you were keeping to yourself for a reason. Maybe you'd rescinded your vows and mentioning the Order would've scared you off. It was hard enough to get you to agree to help us with the llamas in the first place."

"It wasn't *that* hard. I don't think Marika knows how to accept no for an answer."

"She can be very *determined*," Rowena said. "But don't tell her I said that. Rika's outgoing nature balances mine very well. Most of the time." Her tone turned serious. "What are you going to do if Cassia does marry her young man?"

"I'm in no rush to find an apprentice. Unless you want to break your vow to Marika and come spin yarn with me?"

"No thank you. Though, I'll certainly be there if you need me. I can be an honorary member."

"I guess I'll find an apprentice eventually." Lenore stared at the back of Custard's head as her vision blurred with unshed tears. "I don't mind which choice Cassia makes, but I do want her to be able to decide freely and with all the information."

Rowena shuffled closer and wrapped her arm around Lenore's shoulders. "Then you'd better tell those unicorns to shake a leg. Or four."

THE MAIDS WASHED CASSIA'S hair with a concoction that smelled of orange blossom, before fixing it in place with a jewel-encrusted headband, leaving

her long locks to flow over her shoulders in a way they assured her showed the mixed dark brown and light ash colors to their best advantage.

When Alice gushed over her hair color, Cassia suspected she was lying as a kindness. After all, her mother had always complained her hair looked like she'd been rolling around in the ashes from the fire. But Cassia knew a thing or two about lying, and she had to accept that the older maid was being sincere.

The outfit Mistress Althea's elves had made was wonderfully understated. Cassia was dressed in a simple white shirt that lacked both lace and ruffles, flowing trousers of silvery silk, and a matching sleeveless jacket that swept down to the ground. There were elegant buttons on the jacket, and the stitches on the fine material were practically invisible. She silently thanked the tailor for making her feel like a princess. To finish the look, she wore a pair of polished boots with the merest hint of a heel, and she strung her chimera charm on a silver chain around her neck.

By the time she was ready, there was less than half an hour to go until the ceremony. The window gave a view of the grounds where the wedding was to take place, and it was already filling with guests.

"Any sign of my sister?" she asked Alice.

"Not last time I checked with the butler, Miss Cassia."

"Would you check again, please?"

"Of course." Alice bobbed her head before taking her leave.

As soon as she was gone, Cassia lifted the tail of her jacket so it wouldn't gather dirt, and raced to the stables to find Grayson. They needed to begin the process of calling the whole thing off.

At first, she couldn't believe he wasn't there. He was *always* there. But she supposed, like her, he was already dressed and didn't want to dirty his outfit.

She headed to the stable house, where all the stable hands were clean and dressed in their nicest outfits, ready to attend the ceremony.

"Where is he?" she asked, but nobody knew, not even the gardener, Tobin, who hadn't seen him since Grayson had finished dressing.

Cassia searched everywhere, inside and out, but it was as if he'd vanished. Maybe that was his plan for calling off the wedding; he simply wouldn't show up. But if it was, she wished he'd enlightened her. Then Alice found her and told her it was time.

“Time? But I can’t find Grayson!”

“He’s waiting for you.”

“What? He’s already there?”

Alice nodded reassuringly, misunderstanding the reason for Cassia’s panic.

“Has my sister shown up?”

“I’m sorry, but no.”

Cassia felt so numb that she let Alice lead her to the garden. All this effort, and it hadn’t even worked. Avalon hadn’t seen their posters, or if she had, she’d decided against attending. And now Cassia was walking to a wedding that couldn’t proceed. And there was Grayson, standing next to the duke, dressed in a silk suit a darker gray than hers, and looking every bit the royal he’d been born as.

When Cassia stepped up beside them, Grayson wouldn’t meet her gaze, no matter how hard she glared at him.

The duke took her hand with one of his and Grayson’s with the other, then drew their two hands together. He gazed at them with fatherly affection, took a breath, and opened his mouth to start the ceremony.

“Wait!”

Everyone turned to see who would dare interrupt the wedding before it had even begun.

Lenore was running up the aisle. Her clothes were crumpled, she was covered in dust from the road, and some of her tight curls had sprung loose.

Cassia couldn’t hold back a small smile. Lenore must’ve received the invitation late and only just made it in time. It was nice she’d gone the effort when she really didn’t know Cassia that well.

“This wedding cannot go ahead,” Lenore said as she stopped in front of them, panting from her run. “Not until you hear me out.”

“Excuse me,” the duke said, “I hope you have a good reason for this interruption.”

Lenore ignored him and spoke to Cassia. “Don’t break your vow until —”

“You’re already married?” Grayson asked, his fingers twitching in hers.

“What? No.” Cassia shook her head and gave his hand what she hoped was a reassuring squeeze.

“She’s not married,” Lenore said. “She vowed to become a Spinster, and if she marries, she will have broken that vow.”

“I never—” Cassia started.

“You mean to forestall this wedding?” the duke demanded.

“No.” Lenore turned back to Cassia. “The choice is yours, but I want you to make an *informed* decision.”

Despite knowing this might be the perfect excuse she needed to call off the wedding, Cassia found herself saying, “I never vowed to become a Spinster.”

Lenore blinked. “Yes you did. There’s no point lying.”

“I’m not lying.” Cassia pulled up her sleeve. “Look. I took my bracelet off.”

“What is going on?” the duke asked, but they both ignored him.

“I know you took it off, but you don’t need magic to lie,” Lenore insisted. But how could she know about something that had happened after they’d parted ways?

“Are you lying?” Grayson asked.

“No. You know I’m not,” Cassia said, her voice trembling with the desire to be believed. “She asked me to be her apprentice, but I made no vow. I said no and came back here instead.”

“No,” Lenore said, her brows dipping, her voice uncertain. “You said no but returned later that night having changed your mind. You’ve been my apprentice ever since, and a little under two weeks ago, you took your vow.”

“I never changed my mind. I’ve been *here* for weeks.”

“That’s true,” the duke said. “And she’s a very capable employee.”

Lenore glanced from him back to Cassia. “Then who have I been training all this time?”

A voice came from amongst the guests. “That would be me.”

The crowd parted, and Avalon stepped forward.

LENORE SAT IN THE duke’s study, her gaze flicking between the twins—one dolled up for the wedding, one wearing a familiar woolen cardigan despite the warmth of the day. Their hands were clenched tightly together, though

whether to keep one close or prevent the other from fleeing, Lenore wasn't entirely sure.

The duke sat behind his desk, and the groom stood beside a large portrait of a woman whom Lenore assumed was the duchess.

"Who approached me in Grenham all those months ago?" the duke asked.

The bride raised her hand. "That was me, Your Grace, Cassia."

"And who came to woo me for the duke?" Lenore asked.

"Woo you!" the duke spluttered. "I never sent her to woo you, no matter how much you may have desired it in exchange for one of your llamas."

"I never desired it," Lenore snapped. She turned back to glare at the bride, who winced under their scrutiny. "So you *were* after my *llamas* all along."

"Only one."

"Then I'm sorry you had to disappoint His Grace."

"She didn't disappoint me," the duke said. "Not only did she return with a llama; she has performed all her duties magnificently and exceeded my expectations."

"Where did you get a *llama*?"

"It's Waffles," Cassia said.

"You took Waffles?" the other twin, Avalon, asked.

Cassia shrugged. "I didn't *take* her. She followed me. It solved my problem, and she's very happy with Felicity."

"You gave my daughter a wild llama?"

"She wasn't wild," Avalon said. "She was mine. Sort of."

"You gave my daughter a *stolen* llama?"

"No." Cassia pulled a face. "Well, maybe?"

"When did you switch?" Lenore asked.

"We never switched," Cassia said. "I haven't seen Avalon since I left the gingerbread house all those years ago. When you and I parted ways after our visit to the gingerbread house, I returned here, where I've been ever since. Both His Grace and Grayson can vouch for me."

Grayson. Lenore remembered the name, remembered Cassia telling her that he was destined to marry some noblewoman. Now she was marrying him instead.

Lenore turned to the other twin. "Then you're Avalon?"

The young woman huddled deeper into her cardigan. "Yes."

"And you're the one I've been training all this time?"

Avalon nodded. "I heard you ask Cassia to be your apprentice. When she declined, I took her place." Her expression brightened. "Did I do well? Pretending to be her?"

Lenore let out a long breath. It was obvious, now that she thought about it, how different the two young women were. There had been many signs she'd dismissed. Her clothes for one. Her personality for another.

"You were there in the hamlet?" Cassia said, her face twisted with hurt. "Why didn't you come to me? I've been searching for you for *years*."

"I ..." Avalon looked away. She attempted to pull her hand free, but Cassia held on tighter.

"Then *you* were the one who made the vow," Lenore said softly. "Not Cassia. She's free to marry. In which case, I apologize for interrupting the ceremony."

"You've been a prisoner for ten years," Cassia said to her sister. "Why would you vow to remain alone?"

Avalon shot a look at Lenore. "I didn't know that was part of the deal. I thought I was joining a group of Spinsters. I need more than one if we're going to defeat Helene. I can't do it alone."

"You can't defeat Helene," Lenore said. "She's too powerful."

"She's scared of you," Avalon said. "Why do you think she stole your spindles?"

Why *had* Helene stolen her spindles? Lenore still didn't understand that.

"Rory said he thought you were set on destroying the witch," Cassia said. "Was he right?"

"Who's Rory?" the duke asked. "And if there's a dangerous witch in my territory, why has no one told me?"

"Rory is Lord Gregory," Grayson said, from where he was leaning against the wall beside the portrait. He'd been so quiet, Lenore had briefly forgotten he was there.

"*Lord Gregory* is involved with this witch somehow?"

"No," Avalon said. "Our Rory hates Godmother as much as I do, but he's no more capable of defeating her on his own than I am. But since the Order of Spinsters is more like a Disparate Collection, I'll have to find another way to convince him to help me."

“Actually ...” Lenore said. “I was wrong about the Spinsters. That’s what I was rushing here to tell Cassia—to tell *you*. My mentor misled me. We don’t have to be alone.”

“We don’t?” Avalon’s posture unwound, her expression brightening again. Her emotions were always so close to the surface that Lenore was stunned she’d ever believed she was Cassia.

“No. The vow stands. Spinsters do not marry or have children, but we have friends, and we support each other.” The possibilities twisted and twirled in Lenore’s mind. It had been Avalon who’d first spun the magic without a thread. She’d passed that knowledge on to Lenore, and Lenore had passed it on to the other Spinsters. If they all worked together, practiced, and honed those skills, their combined power might actually be enough to defeat Helene as Avalon wanted.

Especially now, when Lenore knew that there was magic out there that even Helene couldn’t defeat. Like the fairy ring.

It wouldn’t be easy, and they would likely only get one chance, because if Helene knew what they could do, she would surely work to derail their plans.

“I know you took your vow prematurely, Avalon, because I’d told Cassia things that I didn’t realize I needed to repeat, but please consider reaffirming it. We can stay together and share the spindles. I’ve met the other Spinsters now, just like you wanted to, and we’re welcome there any time. We can go there now—well, maybe not *right* now, let me have a wash and a sleep first—but we can go together and ask for their help.”

Lenore’s chest felt tight, as if a seed of hope had sprouted and was crushing her lungs and heart. She hadn’t realized how lonely she’d been. When she’d made her vow, she’d pushed everyone and everything away.

She didn’t think she was allowed friends, so she told herself she didn’t need friends.

She didn’t think she was allowed family, so she told herself they were better off without her.

And when she’d broken her vow and lost her spindles, she’d told herself it was all her own fault and she had to do penance to earn them back.

And now she was on the verge of claiming everything she’d ever denied herself, she had to force the words out.

“What do you say?”

Avalon glanced sideways at Cassia. "Will you hate me for taking the place she offered you?"

"No! Of course not. If it makes you happy, if you're not merely trapped in another form of prison, if it means I'll know where you are and will be able to visit, then take it. I forswear it gladly."

Avalon squeezed Cassia's hand before turning back to Lenore. "All right."

All right.

Two simple little words to reaffirm a solemn vow. It was almost an anticlimax. There should have been a ceremony, a celebration, a *something*. But, in the end, Lenore supposed this was enough.

"Thank you," Lenore said. "I'm sorry you didn't get to make your vow in front of the others. You deserved better."

"Now that's sorted," the duke said, "can we get back to the wedding?"

"Oh." Cassia screwed her eyes shut, and when she opened them, she looked as if she was braced for battle. "We need to talk about that."

AT CASSIA'S REQUEST, EVERYONE else left the duke's study so that she and Grayson could talk. He hadn't moved from beside the portrait of the duchess, his shoulder pressed against the wall, his eyes downcast.

She was used to him being reticent and resigned, but she'd never seen him appear bitter before.

"The first part of our plan worked," she said softly. "I have Avalon back. I can't thank you enough for that."

He snorted.

"But now it's time to enact the second part. We need to call this wedding off."

"What if we don't?" He folded his arms tight across his chest and finally lifted his gaze to meet hers. "Would it be so bad if we were wed? We're already friends. That puts us in a better position than when Beau and Maleena married. I could keep working in the stables, and you could keep working as under-steward, and ..." He paused, chewing over his words. "And then I wouldn't have to worry about Lady Eliza."

Cassia was no longer concerned that the duke would release her from his employ if they called off the wedding; he seemed far too happy with her

performance to do that out of spite. And in any case, that wasn't a good enough reason to go through with the wedding.

She now also knew that the duke wouldn't force Grayson into a betrothal with anyone against his will, including Lady Eliza.

But still she hesitated. It would be so easy to tell him exactly what he wanted to hear.

But she'd done that all her life, and it had gotten her into bigger and bigger tangles until she'd been uncertain whether she would be able to work her way out.

Someone needed to tell him some hard truths. And she liked him too much not to be that person. She touched her fingers to the chimera charm, to give her the bravery and confidence to do what needed to be done.

"I won't let you hide behind me."

He flinched back as if she'd struck him. "What?"

"I know you're scared of losing someone you love, but I won't let you marry me in an attempt to stop yourself from feeling pain. Because you won't feel joy, either."

He clenched his jaw. "You think I wouldn't be sad if you died?"

"Sad? Yes. But not eight statues worth of sad." Cassia shook her head. "I know you're in love with Lady Eliza. And I know she's in love with you, too, or she wouldn't have waited seven years for you to keep your promise."

His eyes bulged. "How do you know about that?"

Cassia cursed herself. A lie would be great right now, but no, no more lies. "I overheard you two talking."

He pushed away from the wall and strode to the window where he stood, staring out over the estate.

Cassia followed him. She laid her fingers on his shoulder. He didn't pull away.

"It's too late," he muttered. "She'll never forgive me for betrothing myself to you."

"She might if you tell her the whole story." She slipped the chimera charm over her head and hung it around his neck. "There's only one way to find out."

He reached up to grip the charm, and his tone shifted. No longer closed off and defensive, her long-suffering friend was himself again. "You know

this won't work on me, right?"

"I know," she said. "But when you touch it, think of me, and know that I'm here supporting you, no matter what."

"No matter what," he repeated, before his gaze swung to the door. "How are we going to get ourselves out of this mess, then?"

Cassia grinned. "Simple. We tell the truth."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LENORE AND THE OTHERS waited impatiently in the corridor outside the study. The duke paced back and forth, wearing a track in the plush carpet. Avalon sat on the floor, her back against the wall, her knees pulled up to her chest, watching him curiously. Lenore eased down beside her.

“Why didn’t you tell me who you were?”

Avalon shrugged. “It seemed too big of a risk. And the longer it went on, the harder it became. I kept hoping ... that perhaps ... you’d guess.”

“I’m sorry. I should have suspected something. But I didn’t know Cassia all that well to begin with.”

She reached out and took Avalon’s hand. After years of spinning, the young woman’s fingernails were as short as Lenore’s, and her skin as calloused. “The bigger question is, why didn’t you tell Cassia that you were alive and free?”

Avalon fidgeted with the hem of her cardigan with her free hand. “Did she ever tell you how she escaped the witch?”

“She told me she had to eat her way out of the gingerbread house. And that she had to leave you behind.”

“I saved her. I couldn’t escape, but I could save my sister. So I did.” Her hand tightened on Lenore’s. “Then I spent years convincing myself that the witch wasn’t as bad as I thought, that my confinement was pleasant, actually. My freedom, when it finally came, released a range of emotions that I didn’t know how to control. I ...” I gaze dropped. “I already yelled at one person who didn’t deserve it, and I wasn’t sure ...” She swallowed, and a frown flicked across her features. “Cassia never came back for me.”

“She tried.” Lenore turned to face the young woman. Her voice thickened with emotion. “She searched for you every day for years. She never gave up hope. This whole kerfuffle”—she swept her arm to

encompass the manor house and all its occupants—“was merely another attempt to find you.”

“Really?” Avalon’s gaze was filled with so much suppressed hope that it overflowed and spilled down her cheeks.

Lenore nodded and pulled Avalon against her, and the young woman gripped her tightly. Lenore had no words, and even if she had, she wouldn’t have been able to speak them past the lump in her throat.

“That’s why I didn’t tell you who I was,” Avalon whispered. “I wanted to be Cassia. I wanted to be the one who escaped. Just for a little while.”

“You’re free now,” Lenore whispered back. “And I’ll never let Helene hurt you again.”

She didn’t know if she would be able to keep that vow, but she would damn well try.

The door of the study opened, and Cassia and Grayson stepped out, hand in hand. They both appeared happier and more relaxed than before.

The duke clapped his hands together. “So the wedding’s going ahead?”

“Actually, no.” Cassia exchanged a look with Grayson, who nodded.

“The thing is, Your Grace, I never meant to propose marriage, I was merely trying to save Grayson from having to marry Lady Eliza against his will—”

“But I actually do want to marry Lizzie,” Grayson cut in. “If she’ll still have me.”

“But we continued the charade because it allowed me to spread posters throughout the realm in order to locate my sister.” Cassia smiled down at Avalon. “Which worked. But we have no intention of marrying. And I apologize for misleading you. If you no longer want me in your service, I’ll pack my bag immediately.”

“Immediately?” the duke said, his jaw sagging.

“Yes.” Cassia winced. “As soon as I can get out of this outfit, I’ll—”

“You can’t leave,” the duke cried, his composure crumbling. “You’re the best steward I’ve ever had.”

“Under-steward—”

The duke ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. “I thought you’d be the perfect person to help aid the transition.”

“Transition?” Cassia asked.

“When he retires from being dux and bequeaths his title,” Grayson explained. “But you’re not thinking of doing that already? Who would you

even pick?”

“Transition takes time, so it’s better to get started *before* it’s too late.” The duke regained his composure and gave Cassia a shrewd look. “I’ll return your dowry, but I insist on holding you to the rest of our arrangement. You agreed to work for me until your gold ran out, which at your current rate of recompense will take about ten years.”

Lenore couldn’t help but notice that Cassia had told the truth and been rewarded for it rather than punished. And clearly Cassia knew it too, as she was struggling to suppress a smile as she said, “I will uphold our deal.”

“Excellent,” he said. “Now what are we going to tell the guests? I’m going to have to ply them with twice as much food and stronger beverages to make them forget there was no ceremony.”

“I have a suggestion.” Cassia cast a sly glance at her sister. “How do you feel about telling a tiny half truth?”

LENORE STOOD IN THE garden with the duke and Grayson.

It was enlightening to watch Lord Beaumont work the crowd, smoothing the ruffled feathers of the nobles who didn’t like being made to wait.

A young girl, who after a moment Lenore recognized as the duke’s daughter, Felicity, was entertaining herself by talking to a llama in the paddock behind the garden. Lenore squinted. No, not a llama. A unicorn. Waffles.

Lenore circled around the crowd to stand beside the girl.

“That’s a beautiful animal you’ve got there,” she said mildly.

The girl blinked up at her. “Her name is Waffles. And I remember you.”

“Hello, Waffles.” Lenore reached across the fence to let Waffles sniff and slobber on her hand. “It’s been a while. Thank you for saving me from Helene.”

“You know her?” Felicity asked.

“Oh, we met a long time ago.”

“Then you know she’s *special*. Just like your ones.”

Lenore gave Felicity an innocent look. “I have no idea what you mean, child. This is obviously an ordinary llama. Just like my ones.”

Felicity fired back a look that said she knew when adults were speaking nonsense. “If she’s so ordinary, why does she go all sparkly when I do

this?” She tilted her head and scrunched her eyes.

“Probably a trick of the light.” Lenore waved her hand dismissively.

“And what about this?” Felicity climbed halfway up the fence so she could reach over and brush Waffles’ fringe back from her forehead to reveal the nub of her horn.

“Looks like a fairly standard forehead abnormality to me.”

Felicity glared at her. “She’s a unicorn. Cassia told me so. She told me Waffles saved her from a wicked witch. Were you there, too?”

“I was.”

Felicity smiled smugly, as if Lenore had yielded the argument.

Waffles nuzzled her hand and Lenore stroked her neck. “You know, her fleece will spin up beautifully. Tell your father to contact me when she’d ready to be shorn. I’ll teach you.”

“Spinning?” Felicity screwed up her nose. “That’s peasant work.”

Lenore arched her eyebrow. “Are you going to hand your precious unicorn fleece over to a stranger?” She turned back to Waffles, and said idly, as if speaking to the animal, “I suppose it doesn’t matter. I doubt a spoiled noble’s daughter would be able to spin magic anyway.”

“I’m not spoiled. I take care of Waffles all by myself. Well, Cassia helps. And Grayson, too, sometimes.”

“Oh, you’re *not* spoiled. So, your father didn’t spend a fortune to capture a rare magical beast simply to keep you happy?”

Felicity’s mouth screwed up like she was about to protest, but she stayed silent. Lenore doubted anyone had ever dared point out that, despite the fact that Felicity wasn’t overly demanding, her father still indulged her every whim. And that wasn’t healthy for anyone.

Lenore crouched down so her face was level with Felicity’s. “Before you can control magic, you have to be able to control yourself.” She straightened, yawned, and stretched her arms. She really could do with a nap. But not while stuck in a fairy ring this time. “My offer stands. When you’re ready, let me know.”

AVALON STARED AT HERSELF in the full-length mirror and shifted uncomfortably. She was wearing Cassia’s wedding outfit, and felt like she

was taking her wish to be her sister a step too far. “Are you sure about this?”

Cassia stood behind her, smiling over Avalon’s shoulder as she fluffed her hair. “Absolutely. We can’t have you making such an important vow looking like you been rolling around in the fireplace.”

“I already took the vow,” Avalon pointed out. There had been precious little time to do more than wash her face, run a comb through her hair, and swap clothes.

“I know. But now there’s a whole crowd of people to witness it. And such a solemn occasion should be honored. And this time, I’ll be there with you.”

Avalon turned around to face her sister, keeping her emotions firmly in check.

She didn’t hate Cassia for failing to rescue her. They’d been children, fighting against magic that was stronger than both of them. Avalon would’ve been more annoyed with her sister if she’d refused to escape when she had the chance.

She may have spent plenty of time wishing *she’d* been the free maid, but that wasn’t Cassia’s fault.

No.

All of this was because of Helene.

She was the one whom Avalon would save her hatred and anger for.

Avalon clasped her sister’s hands. “I’m glad you got away.”

Cassia’s lip trembled and words poured forth. “I shouldn’t have left you. I spent ten years searching. I never gave up.”

“I believe that. You always were the stubborn one.”

“I wasn’t stubborn. *You* were stubborn.”

“Come on.” Avalon led her sister to the door. “Let’s get out there before all those haughty nobles get bored and go home.”

Lenore and the duke were standing in front of the crowd gathered in the garden, and as Avalon approached, the duke began to speak.

“You will have to forgive this ruse, but we invited you here today not to witness a wedding but something far more rare. Today, our young friend is reaffirming her vow to join a secret order.”

“It won’t be secret for long if he keeps blabbing about it,” Cassia whispered, and Avalon had to stifle a laugh. Although she had to admit, she

didn't think it would be so bad if the Spinsters became a bit more of an open secret. It might help to gather more recruits.

"I ask you to join me as witnesses and honor her vow by keeping the details of this arcane event to yourselves."

Avalon stopped in front of Lenore. Cassia kissed her cheek, released her hand, and stepped back to stand beside her friend, Grayson, the groom who wasn't a *groom*.

Lenore smiled kindly at her. "Avalon," she said, and a shiver ran over Avalon's skin at being called by her own name, "do you promise to keep our spindles safe, use their magic wisely, and pass them on when the time is right?"

"I do," Avalon said, making sure to give the words their proper weight.

"And do you promise never to let anything distract you from your vow, neither marriage nor children?"

"I do."

She was ready to step back, to accept the congratulations of the crowd or whatever one did in a situation such as this, but Lenore wasn't finished.

"And do you promise to call on your fellow Spinsters when you need their help, build a circle of friends who will keep you strong, listen to your mentor when she is right, and point out when she is wrong?"

Avalon couldn't hold in her laughter that time. "I definitely do."

Lenore's smile widened. "Excellent. Welcome to the Order. Again."

Cassia let out a whoop and started a round of applause that quickly spread through the crowd.

As Lenore pulled her in for a hug, Avalon found herself thinking that it wouldn't be so bad to be a Spinster, with her friends and family around.

She was no longer trapped in the gingerbread house.

She was no longer alone.

But she was no less determined.

She made one more vow, silently, to herself.

Somehow, eventually, Avalon would defeat Helene. No matter the cost.

After all, she'd once sacrificed herself to save her sister. She would do the same again if it meant saving the world from the witch's schemes.

THE GINGERBREAD HOUSE WAS quiet as Helene gazed out the kitchen window into the garden.

No Avalon. No Waffles.

Helene shouldn't have cared—she should have barely noticed. After all, she'd hardly been here in the last few years, her focus drawn, as it had been, by Rory.

And yet ...

She noticed the quiet.

She wasn't meant to get attached. Humans were insignificant. Interchangeable. Means to an end. Nothing more.

At least, in that regard, things were working out.

The end she desired was getting closer to being possible.

Just a few more pieces to maneuver and then everything would be ready, and the rest would be up to them.

She needed to be careful as she wove the final threads. Humans were unpredictable. Nothing could be left to chance.

A change in the air heralded the goblin king's arrival. She waited for him to approach, waited for his gentle caress.

It didn't come.

She glanced over her shoulder.

Bernard, in the guise of the tenderhearted rogue, stood in the doorway of the cupboard, the magical portal showing the training room behind him. His arms were crossed, showing his muscles to their best advantage.

Yes. This was a perfect distraction.

"I wondered when you would show up." She kept her tone cold as she stalked toward him, careful not to reveal how much she needed him.

He held up his hand to stop her, and she froze as if he'd laid a spell upon her. "What is your game, Helene?"

"My game?" she purred. "Why don't you propose one? I would be happy to play."

He swallowed hard then shook his head, not rising to the bait. "This isn't merely idle entertainment anymore. What is your end goal?"

Helene drew up to her full height, adding an extra inch to the heels of her shoes so she could overshadow Bernard. "You dare demand answers from me? You forget yourself, huntsman."

His eyes narrowed, and some of the goblin king's impertinence entered his expression. "I suppose nothing has changed. I'll try to stop you, like I always have."

"Oh, please." Helene turned her back on him. "You've done everything I've ever wanted."

Bernard caught her arm and wrenched her around, his fingers digging into her skin through the fabric of her gown. "I won't let you hurt our Rory anymore."

Helene arched her eyebrow. "And you accused *me* of having a soft spot for the boy."

"I'll stop you," he insisted, his voice, in his rage, losing some of its resonance. "Whatever it is, I'll stop you."

Helene caught his fingers, peeled them from her arm, then squeezed them so tight that she could hear his bones grinding against each other.

His jaw tensed against the pain.

"Or," she said, leaning in close, "you could help me succeed, and then our Rory, and all the others, will have nothing to fear from me ever again."

Bernard's eyes widened, betraying his confusion, his doubt. She remembered the first time she'd seen those emotions in his expression. Things had worked out well for her then.

He unclenched his jaw, and his defiance fled. "I'm forever at your service, my lady."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Amberley Martin is an author from Aotearoa New Zealand.

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You can find out more about Amberley and her writing at
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BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR

The Fairy Godmother Tales

The Rogue and the Peasant
The Demi-Wolf and the Hunter
Mollification For a Giant (novella)
The Spinster and the Free Maid

Short story available exclusively by subscribing to Amberley's newsletter

www.amberleymartin.com/subscribe

Pestilence For a Rogue

CONTENT GUIDE

The Fairy Godmother Tales are meant to be fun reads, but I understand some readers may want to know what they're getting into before they start. Nothing on the list below is particularly gory or graphic.

- Parental neglect
- Parental/spousal death
- Kidnapping, captivity, and indentured servitude
- Forced marriage (implied)
- Forced solitude
- Violence and death (being burned alive)
- Minor romantic subplot, but no sexual content (not even kissing)
- Happy ending